



How Do We Build Leaders Who Can Thrive In This More Demanding Era?

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David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group and Adam Bryant, Senior Managing Director at the ExCo Group sat down with Pat Wadors, CHRO of Intuitive; Payal Sahni, Chief People Experience Officer at Pfizer; and Kelly Bradley, CHRO of RBC to explore what leadership really requires today, from experimentation and curiosity to resilience, trust, and leading through constant uncertainty.

Reimer: We're in such a challenging time for leadership right now. What issues are top of mind for each of you these days?

Wadors: Leaders today have to be agile, humble, and curious. They have to assume that their playbooks of the past no longer apply. I often use the "touching the elephant" parable to describe this moment. It's about how a blind man cannot understand the totality of the elephant because each part of it feels so different. You have to assume that your biases, based on what you've done in the past, are limiting your ability to see the whole picture.

So how do you help create alignment of understanding? At a recent offsite, we agreed that we wanted all our leaders to start framing our new initiatives in terms of experimentation. That means we start with a hypothesis. Then we're going to throw out some ideas, experiment, review the results, and then ask ourselves, what did we learn from that? And how would we modify our approach based on what we learned? We're trying to build that new DNA of always asking ourselves, what did we learn?

Using the word “experiment” does impact the way people think. If you talk in terms of strategy and objectives, it can feel like you’ve failed if you don’t hit the goals. But experimentation is more about learning. It leads to more willingness to take some risk, share what you don’t know, and share what you’ve learned with others. It also reduces stress in the organization.

Sahni: A crucial question is, how do you set up the organization for the future? Because people do want certainty. They want to know when all the disruption and change is going to stop. But we are constantly changing, and people have to get comfortable with that because the pace of change is accelerating.

At Pfizer, we’re refreshing our blueprint because the world is changing so quickly. When the environment changes, you need to stay flexible and constantly iterate. While you need to know your general direction, the path ahead could be realized in multiple different ways.

You can help people get comfortable with this way of thinking by giving them a range of different experiences, including moving to different departments or functions. Because then you will be able to see things holistically, rather than focusing on one element of the work that we do. That’s the best way to prepare yourself for what’s ahead in the future so that you can see around corners.

Bradley: A big issue for me is, how do we build leaders who can thrive in this more demanding era? We’re asking leaders to run the business of today while they reinvent the business of tomorrow and deliver consistent results in very volatile markets. They have to make sharper decisions while being the emotional center of gravity for their teams, supporting and inspiring them.

They have to remain steady under pressure and make calls for which there is almost no playbook. And they have to create trust and connection in a world that feels very noisy and polarized. We can’t develop leaders the old way. We have to try to equip them for a very different era that demands more resilience, adaptability, and humanity.

To develop those leaders, we have to embrace more experiential learning, because there aren’t necessarily books to help train them. We have to be comfortable with the idea of giving leaders chances and coaching them through opportunities that may not feel naturally aligned to their past.

Bryant: What are the implications of all these seismic shifts for the way organizations do succession planning?

Bradley: Succession planning has always been scenario-based. You’re always choosing the leader for the context. What’s more challenging now is that the context is changing so rapidly that the leader that you thought you were preparing may or may not be prepared for the coming context.

So boards and management are having to be more adaptive. We have to look at candidates and context at the same time. You have to scenario plan for the slate of candidates and the available roles, and that does require mixing and matching people in ways that we haven’t in the past.

The benefit of some technology advancements is that it’s making technical domain expertise, at least in banking, a bit less critical. So you can optimize for leaders who have the behavioral capabilities, including the ability to lead through a more polarizing environment and create followership. Technology can be a bit of a democratizer in terms of the skills you need.

Sahni: I agree. It used to be that we would say you need certain must-have skills for various roles before someone was even considered. We've started to move away from that already in the last couple of years, because the emergence of technology that demands different skill sets.

As boards and management work through various scenarios, they have moved away from traditional thinking around high-potentials for certain roles. Clearly, you need some line of sight in terms of understanding a particular function, but now it's more about the kind of experiences they've had and the challenges they've faced. You're looking for the unique ways in which somebody tackles a problem, because the future problems will be very different, and you want to understand how they will go about solving them.

You're also looking for how they galvanize the organization, especially as change can be equated with some level of fear. Putting some of our high potentials on projects to lead where they are not the expert but have to build a team to drive clear outcomes is one way to get them to think differently. We call it "Pilot in Command."

When there's a project to address some change we want to make, we will appoint a leader for that particular initiative. And we use the plane model. Who is the Pilot? Who is the Crew? Who's going to handle Air Traffic Control? That helps us get away from the usual way of solving issues, which is by organizational hierarchy.

We assign a Pilot who then pulls together a small crew and is accountable for the project and empowered to make decisions. This way there is a clear decision maker and we don't have problems that sometimes slow down initiatives, because everybody has an opinion and people get frustrated.

This new model has been really successful for us in the last couple of years, and we are scaling it to say that this is how we expect to work. We put a lot of rigor behind it. We make people go to "flight school" before they launch a project. And we do a lot of performance management.

Reimer: What is it about each of your backgrounds that prepared you for this role of endless disruption and ambiguity?

Wadors: I love solving problems, and every day brings new problems and opportunities in my world. You have to stay calm, lean in, learn, and work with other people to solve the problems. I love that. My goal is to leave the world or the company better than I found it, and to leave the person I'm dealing with stronger because I was engaged with them.

Being dyslexic helped give me grit and made me comfortable not knowing things. Questions became my best tool. For me to pass spelling or math, or anything that relied on that kind of sequencing, required me to build relationships with the teacher or the TA to overcome any hurdles. Whatever labels people wanted to put on me weren't going to define me. I think differently than many people, and I like different points of view. That gets me excited.

Sahni: My parents came to the U.S from Afghanistan. I saw them do two, three, four jobs. I saw a lot of discrimination, and I saw a lot of obstacles thrown in their way. But I remember my mother and my father always saying to me, don't use that as an excuse. Instead of complaining about obstacles, I was always taught to find a way around them. I take that approach in everything I do.

Bradley: I'm a super curious person. I really like to understand things, especially things I don't know anything about. I was like that when I was little, and I'm like that now.

Some of my earliest memories are about feeling a sense of pride when I fixed really hard things. It started with games when I was young, but as I got older, I started to find that life rewards you for chasing those challenges. The more you're willing to take on, the more people are willing to give you. Once you have that mindset, I find that it's fun when you get an intrinsically complicated problem.

The people I like working with most are the people who also think it's fun. The HR work we do is by nature multifaceted and complex, and the fact that humans are at the core of what we do automatically adds to the complexity. If you don't love that and get real energy from that, it's going to be very difficult to succeed right now in human resources.

Bryant: What do senior executives need right now to be successful in an enterprise-level role?

Wadors: They have to be a systems thinker and understand that relationships matter if you want to accomplish anything. They have to be humble and curious. Without those skills, you can end up solving the wrong problems or try to solve them in the wrong sequence.

Sahni: Curiosity is essential. You shouldn't feel like you have to be right all the time. The more senior you are, the more you can feel the need to have all the answers. But at this pace of change, it's okay to say that you also have questions. That mindset allows you to ask more questions and learn, and then take those insights and apply them holistically.

Bradley: We don't need perfect answers from leaders. We need leaders who are honest and steady and have a commitment to lead with courage and clarity. When leaders feel anxious, as we all do from time to time, they lead less well.

I often have conversations when I tell people to take a step back and think clearly about what they are trying to achieve. As a CHRO right now, if you can get leaders back to that place, which they all want to lead from anyway, you can get to much better answers, regardless of what the problem is.