



Leaders Must Be Able To Prioritize While Also Leaving Space To Deal With The Unknown

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Julie Fuller, Executive Vice President, Chief Human Resources Officer and Global Operations at Zoetis, the animal health company, shared her key leadership lessons with The ExCo Group's Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include the disruptive impact of AI, the necessity for adaptability in leaders, and the importance of self-awareness for personal and professional growth.

Reimer: What issues are top of mind for you right now?

Fuller: The big, resounding one is the impact of AI. It's probably the biggest disruptor we've ever seen, and we can't predict all the implications, even in the near-term. There are so many different issues surrounding that, including the role that HR plays at an enterprise level.

It also raises many governance issues. I was at a dinner recently and one leader shared a question that had come up in her organization: If someone develops an AI assistant, can they take it with them when they leave the company? We haven't had to think about things like that before. And even the name "human resources" may not apply as much in the future, because work will be done in different forms and jobs will change faster and faster.

Another big issue is that the external landscape is harder to predict than ever. That has a lot of implications for leaders, including the way we develop them to be adaptable and manage change. We

have to be clear about what we need from our leaders as we bring our organizations through change that won't stop. The world is so dynamic now.

We've been talking about adaptability and learning agility for a long time, but they are taking on new meaning—how do you prioritize while also leaving some space for the unknown? Most of us are working to capacity already. How do we teach leaders to be adaptable, to be great at simplifying complexity, and also to be able to flex as needed? This is the world we live in now.

Bryant: What other X factors are crucial for current and future leaders these days?

Fuller: One is being able to focus on outcomes over activity, which requires the ability to prioritize the work that will create the most value. There's a lot we can't anticipate, but we have to be focused on the key things that are going to move our business forward. A leader's job is to manage resourcing and how work gets done.

Enterprise leadership is also key—we all have to be thinking beyond our individual roles. And this is not just the C-suite. Every leader has to be thinking holistically across boundaries and be able to collaborate with employees across the company to get things done.

Self-awareness is also really important. I would not be in this role today if I did not have strong mentors and managers who gave me direct feedback early and consistently throughout my career. You've got to understand your blind spots and your strengths so that you can leverage those.

Reimer: What themes come up most often when you have mentored and coached senior executives?

Fuller: A big one is the impact of our style on others. So many people don't understand that. I can't tell you how many times during my career I have used the phrase "impact versus intent"—their intent may be good, but their approach is having a negative impact on others.

Another common theme is the importance of having difficult conversations with others. This is innately uncomfortable for people, but giving people feedback is a huge part of growth. I think most organizations are not great at it, because people are worried about offending others. We have a hard time being direct and candid.

My mother was a therapist and we would have these family meetings when we were teenagers, and at the time we thought they were horrible. She would talk to us about using your "I messages." We would complain that we were not her patients or clients and tell her not to psychoanalyze us.

Now I can appreciate that she was teaching us how to disarm people when giving them feedback by focusing on how it feels to you rather than focusing on what the other person did. I can't tell you how often I recommend using my mother's "I message" in coaching conversations with leaders today. It makes difficult conversations easier, because no one can really argue with how another person feels.

My other advice for courageous conversations is to always be clear about the three key messages you must deliver before you walk out of the room. You have to be prepared for how you're going to deliver those, because if you're not, you might stumble and not deliver the message you need to convey.

Bryant: How do you hire? What are your favorite job interview questions?

Fuller: I usually start by saying, “I have your background. I’d love to hear your story in five minutes or less, including two or three pivotal learning moments for you.” I’m testing for their ability to concisely articulate some key points, but I often have to cut people off because they’ll give me their entire biography, and then I won’t get to my other questions. I’m also testing for what they consider to be a real learning experience.

Reimer: What’s the best leadership lesson you learned from a job that you had before you were 20 years old?

Fuller: I started working early on and had a lot of different jobs. When I was 16, a friend of mine and I were hired by her mother to work as birthday party clowns. Her mom had a balloon business, and she wanted to do more kids’ birthday parties.

So she got us costumes and a kit of magic tricks that we didn’t know how to use. We would have to entertain all these kids at different birthday parties for more than an hour. That was one of the first times I was completely out of my comfort zone—and had to learn how to succeed in my job with no experience or training. It was probably my first stretch assignment!