



Our Top Performers Have Relentless Curiosity. They Ask Questions And Want To Learn More.

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Nancy Wolfe, Chief Human Resources Officer of Ingredion, shares her leadership insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer in this Strategic CHRO interview. Her key themes include HR's expanding role in the age of AI, the shift toward skills-based work and organizational design, and the leadership capabilities required to lead effectively through constant change.

Reimer: What issue is top of mind for you these days?

Wolfe: It's this whole new age of AI, which I see as such an opportunity for HR. Our role and our function really helps get to be an architect of what this is going to look like in organizations.

And it's got so many tentacles. There's culture readiness, there's the change readiness, and there's skills readiness. When you think about a future-ready organization, HR as a function is going to play a really critical role. It's not an evolution. It's going to be a revolution, and the role we get to play is huge.

Bryant: It's such a big and sprawling issue. What aspect of it are you particularly focused on?

Wolfe: We're looking hard at the work that really needs to get done, and who's best to do it. How you think about skills architecture versus roles and titles? What's the work that needs to get done? How is it best done? How do you best structure the organization around that?

Reimer: What are the X factors that you're looking for in the best leaders these days?

Wolfe: One is the ability to pivot and change—to want to drive that change and not be resistant to it. Another is relentless curiosity. They want to learn more, ask more questions, and they don't assume they know the answer. Our top performers are learning machines. And the third one, which we certainly saw during Covid, is the ability to develop relationships. Nothing gets done by individuals alone. It always requires collaboration and partnership.

Bryant: What is it about your background that set you up to thrive in this challenging role of being a CHRO?

Wolfe: I grew up in central Illinois, and I've been working since I was 13 years old. I babysat, I detassled corn, and I worked in fast-food restaurants. I was always going to school and working at the same time, including in college. I just had this work ethic that my parents ingrained in me.

I also like to win, so if I'm going to do something, I'm going to work hard and I'm going to be in it to win. That's just how I'm wired. I grew up in a wonderful family environment, but there were expectations that you were going to do well in school and you were going to work.

Reimer: What was an important early leadership lesson for you?

Wolfe: It's about empowering people. A leader once said to me, "Nancy, if there's anything I'm doing that you want to do, just let me know." It sounds so simple. I told him that I wanted to do the analysis on a particular project and present the results. He said, "Okay, it's yours." That stayed with me. I'm always looking to help people be better, be more engaged, and maybe even take over some of my responsibilities in order to grow.

Bryant: When you're hiring, what qualities are you looking for, and what questions do you ask in job interviews?

Wolfe: I'm really looking for learning agility. I'm assuming they can learn our business, our portfolio, and our processes. So I want to see how they're going to show up as a leader within my team and the function and then within the business. Can they collaborate across a matrixed organization like ours to get work done?

Some of the questions I like to ask include, tell me about a really complex problem that you had to solve. I also like to ask people to tell me what their superpower is. It's always interesting to see how people respond. What differentiates them? What are they going to bring that is different, unique, and additive to our business and our function?

Reimer: What advice do you share with people who starting out in their career?

Wolfe: I tell them to be curious. Ask questions, learn, read, engage, especially on those topics that you don't know about. Everybody's wanting to learn as much as they can on AI.

I also talk about the importance of emotional intelligence and the need to be human. That's going to become even more critical, given the bigger role that technology is playing, and going to play, in our lives.

And I always talk about the need to build and nurture relationships and networks. That's how people find internships, jobs, and new opportunities. You have to engage in that process, rather than just responding to job postings online.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Wolfe: Leadership is just a really hard thing to do consistently and well every single day.