



The Best Leaders Are Thoughtful About Trying To Help Maximize The Broader Organization

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Bei Ling, head of human resources at Wells Fargo, explores key leadership lessons such as navigating workforce transformation, building adaptability in the age of AI, and leading through sustained uncertainty with David Reimer and Adam Bryant in the latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: What issues and challenges are top of mind for you these days?

Ling: First and foremost is workforce transformation and the implications of AI being integrated as part of the business operations, including what that means for us as an organization in terms of the day-to-day operating model.

Along with that, particularly for the HR organization, I think a lot about the obligation we have to help the workforce with reskilling and transformation. We can provide them with a lot of content and skills training, but the question and challenge remain the rate of adoption.

Over time, how can we help the broader organization start to think about the future and what that transition is going to require? And what does that mean for how colleagues work together, and how leaders lead?

CHROs also have to help tackle the issue of mental health and stability for employees. There are a lot of uncertainties in the world, beyond the impact of AI, that put a lot of pressure on everyone. That raises the question of what organizations can do and should do to help their employees.

Bryant: Is there a more resilient, practical way of thinking about dealing with change?

Ling: I believe that human beings are not wired to pursue change, especially when change creates uncertainty. So we need to build adaptability as part of an ongoing skill set. It's no longer about buckling up, working through some change, and then life will be fine. Change has become a part of a leader's capability. It's a challenge every day.

Reimer: What else do you see as the X factors that separate the best leaders these days?

Ling: One that really distinguishes great leaders, in my experience, is learning agility. People who are humble never really think of themselves as a know-it-all, and they always have a high level of curiosity, particularly about the external environment and how it impacts the business.

Another X Factor is being able to create sustained followership and make others around them better. Many leaders are good at delivering for their own part of the organization. But the great ones think about the end-to-end business. What are the short-term and long-term implications of decisions? The best leaders are thoughtful about trying to figure out how to maximize the broader organization.

Reimer: You've been at Wells Fargo for almost five years, helping to drive a cultural transformation at the bank. What have you learned about that art form?

Ling: Cultural transformation has to start at the top, and it absolutely is not going to happen until it is absorbed every level. While HR plays a significant role to enable cultural transformation, HR cannot own the culture transformation and be the only group that's driving it. The accountability and responsibility have to be felt at every leadership level.

Clarity is extremely important—not just for the words you say, but for the infrastructure and ecosystem you build to drive the transformation. What behaviors are valued? What behaviors are not allowed? Cultural transformation takes years, and you've got to be willing to adapt and make tweaks as needed.

Bryant: What were important early influences that shaped your leadership style today?

Ling: It starts with my parents, who were a typical tiger mom and tiger dad. They drilled into me the importance of learning and constantly striving for excellence. It was a bit exhausting as a kid, because if I got a 95 on a test, they would always ask about the other five points. The biggest benefit for me is that when I do things, I'm doing it to meet the standards I set for myself, not the standards that others set.

Working at Merrill Lynch during the financial crisis was a very important career turning point. I didn't have that many years of experience, and I learned so much from that time, particularly about risk-management and understanding how you make decisions in the context of what you know and don't know.

I also got pretty good at managing stress through that experience. For six months, there was an enormous amount of pressure on me and my team. You either succeed through it or you crumble. Ever since, stress is not something I worry about that much.

During that time, I also learned about who you can trust in a crisis. Who has your back, and who can you count on when everybody is exhausted? That taught me a lot about building trust, and the importance of having a team who have each other's backs. It takes a lot to build trust, and it takes very little to destroy it.

Reimer: The challenges you face in your role are not for the faint of heart.

Ling: It's a question of attitude, right? I love the process of solving problems. You get to meet a lot of interesting people, and everything you learn along the way is enormously interesting. And because of the role we play in HR, you can see the impact you're having on people's lives.

Bryant: What will CHROs need to succeed in the role in 2030?

Ling: Certain things will remain core to the job. Great CHROs always know the business really well, and they don't necessarily view HR as a separate function. Rather, they view HR as an enabler for the business to grow, and they are willing to challenge the business leaders when the circumstance demands it.

If you look ahead, an increasingly important skill for HR is to be able to connect the dots in the organization. As HR leaders, we need to think ahead to understand the implications of decisions that are made, and know what is required across the organization to manage the impact of those decisions. That requires an ability to influence decision-making, as well. You have to know how to ask questions in the right way to engage others.

Reimer: What's the most lasting leadership lesson you've learned from a challenging boss?

Ling: I did have this one boss who did a lot for me. She was a big advocate and gave me a lot of opportunities. But she was such a micromanager that she would often literally stand behind me while I worked. That had a long-lasting impact on my leadership style. So, I like to give broad direction and then dig into the details when I have to. But generally speaking, I try to empower my team.

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

Ling: The hardest part of leadership is looking somebody that you really like in the eye and telling them that it's for them to move on. That never gets easier.