



David Bryant, Group General Manager, People & Culture, St. Vincent's Health



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

Your Leadership Development Program Has to be Led by the C-suite, Not H.R.

Published on October 28, 2019



Adam Bryant [in](#)

Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

David Bryant, head of people and culture at St. Vincent's Health in Australia, had a rare opportunity to build from scratch many of his

organization's culture and leadership initiatives. In our interview, he shared powerful insights for anyone in the H.R. field.

Q. You've had many HR roles over your career, most of them in big corporations. What attracted you to healthcare?

A. This role at St. Vincent's has been a fantastic opportunity to come in and think about really impacting an organization, because in healthcare in Australia, and specifically St. Vincent's, there had never been much investment in leadership at any level.

So I had this rare chance to work with my peers and a new CEO to decide how we were going to develop ourselves as a leadership group. It's also been enormously challenging because so many people have not been exposed to these discussions. We put our executives through 360-degree assessments, and most of them told me it was the first time they had ever had that kind of feedback.

Another pressing issue in this organization was employee safety. I had worked for 12 years at Qantas, and certainly safety was a fundamental part of the culture. I came here and found that we were injuring staff at a phenomenal rate. People hurt their backs from lifting, and there were slips and falls. Abuse by aggressive patients was also a small but growing problem.

It was really quite disturbing. This is a mission-based organization set up by the Sisters of Charity and yet we were creating an environment where people would come to work and get hurt. So we set about

changing the culture and creating an organization that put safety first.

Q. How did you do that?

A. I got the data and started presenting it in a really compelling manner. I met with our CEOs and senior executives, and they agreed that it was a serious problem and we needed to do something about it. But the real impact came with the board after I told them three simple stories about employees who were injured working here.

That had a profound impact. You could have heard a pin drop. It galvanized the board, and from that moment, everything moved forward. Over three to four years, safety started to become absolutely who we were and part of our culture.

Q. How did you go about introducing a leadership development culture? What were your guiding principles?

A. Research shows that the majority of leadership development programs fail to meet their stated objectives. That's a really important point to discuss with the leadership team because if you're going to make a significant investment, it should be done based on what's going to have highest likelihood of success.

"Don't go after the shiny new object each year."

The first thing is, when you start a program, you have to stick to it. So don't go after the shiny new object each year. You want the language you use around leadership to become familiar to everybody. You have to be consistent, so that it's not a one-off. Don't spend a lot of money over a year or two and then do nothing.

The next thing is that it has to be led by the executive team, so that it's not seen as an HR program developed by HR and everybody's sort of a passive participant. You want as much buy-in as you can get around the importance of developing your people, so that there's a sense that we're all in this together.

With the program we've run, we have made sure that we spend real time with each individual, giving them a chance to think about how they lead and how they're showing up to different areas of the organization, and then come back to them with regular assessments about that.

The first leadership program we ran was very much around the members of the new leadership team, and the leadership teams those people led in their own areas. We then morphed to more of a cross-pollination model. We've been bringing together small groups from across the organization.

What's worked really well for us is to break those cohorts into small groups of two or three people. We will meet with them to talk about the big challenges they're facing and what they're up against. We help coach them, and they coach each other, as well. Because they meet

regularly, people do feel like they are being constantly, in a nice way, developed and challenged.

Q. That's an interesting insight about bringing people together from different parts of the organization.

A. In our first leadership programs, people who were on the same teams often had an attitude of, "I don't understand why I'm here, I don't understand what this is about, those things never work." But when shifted to cross-functional groups, the dynamic was completely different. Everybody was vulnerable and was happy to be open to the discussions.

Q. If you were speaking to an audience of 100 newly minted CHROs, what advice would you give them?

A. First, you have to deliver flawlessly on the administrative aspects of HR. Then make sure your practices and innovations are linked to the business strategy, which should keep the customer at the core of it. You can't be internally focused.

"What are you going to do to make sure that you continue to learn and develop yourself?"

Second, you need to put an HR strategy and structure together that makes sense for the organization. Third is to spend more time on your

personal development. Don't forget about yourself. As the CHRO, the organization's going to be looking to you for answers. So what are you going to do to make sure that you continue to learn and develop yourself?

Q. How did you get into the field of HR?

A. Early in my life, I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. Through school, I wanted to be a journalist and volunteered at the local newspaper. I ended up in accounting because some friends went into accounting.

I was good at math and you got to wear a suit and work in the city, but those were a horrible two years. I think I was the worst accountant that Deloitte had ever hired. But I found that I really liked working with people, which is a pretty general statement, but I found my way into human resources.

Q. What has been the most important leadership lesson you've learned?

A. The most important lesson has been around listening. Earlier in my career, I was quite driven and focused, and I really liked to be measured on achievement. I delivered and took pride in delivery and learned over a period of time, through 360s and some good leaders that I worked with, that I would be more successful if I spent more time listening and bringing people along, rather than driving them hard.

Q. Let's shift gears to interviewing. How do you hire?

A. I always ask people, what can you tell me about this role? It's so basic, but it's a brilliant question because the candidate will talk about their level of interest, their passion for the role, their ability to research. That will lead to a discussion about they see the role – how they define it, how they will impact the organization.

I'll also ask about their sense of purpose. What defines you? What kind of difference do you want to make?