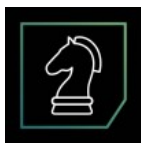




Lucien Alziari, chief human resources officer, Prudential Financial



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

In Your Role, What are the Three or Four Things You're Going to Achieve?

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***Lucien Alziari**, the chief human resources officer of Prudential Financial, is in his third CHRO role, and shared memorable insights about prioritization and his "tough love" management style with me and **David Reimer**, my colleague and the CEO of **The ExCo Group**, a senior leadership development and executive mentoring firm.*

Reimer: How did you get into the field of HR in the first place?

Alziari: I started my career in manufacturing and operations, working shifts making chocolate bars for M&M Mars. I was asked to take a rotational assignment in HR, and I never moved back. Quite by accident, I found the professional love of my life. I'm also a modern history graduate, so there's a limit to my scientific understanding, and this was going to catch up with me at some stage in operations.

Reimer: This is your third CHRO role. What is it about the field that holds your interest for all these years?

Alziari: The great thing about the CHRO role is that everybody does it with their own points of emphasis. The CEO role, the CFO role and the CHRO role are the three roles that have a view and accountability across the company. The beauty of the CHRO role is that you can really combine all that we know about how we treat people with how we compete as businesses. It's noble work because if we treat people well, we get great performance. If we get great performance, companies win.

Bryant: If you were speaking to an audience of 100 newly minted

CHROs about the X-factors for doing this job well, what would you tell them?

Alziari: I would ask them, “Who are you?” When I ask you that question, are you saying to yourself, “I’m an HR executive who’s here to do great HR work?” Or are you saying to yourself, “I’m a business leader who’s accountable for the success of the business and I happen to bring HR organizational talent and skills?” I have a very clear preference about which of those is the right answer. Not enough CHROs think of themselves as business leaders. To me, that is a real point of distinction.

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Second, I would say to them that you’re going to be in this job for five years or seven years or however long it’s going to be, and you’re going to be remembered for three or four things. Why three or four? Because if you try and do ten, you’re going to be doing ten small things and you’re going to get lost in trivia. If you choose the right things, you’re going to make a strategic impact on how the business competes and wins.

So my advice is to spend a lot of time, particularly the first 90 days, understanding competitively the environment in which your company

is operating and getting to a point of view on the three or four things that you can do that can make a profound difference. And then, for the next five years, spend 80 percent of your time on those three things.

Bryant: And what are your three or four?

Alziari: The first is that we're going to have world-class talent in critical roles. That forces us to understand what world-class really means. And what are those pivot points in the business where the difference between good and great really makes a difference to winning?

The second is that we're going to have the capabilities to win. Where do we need to be world-class to win as a company? The third is that we're going to be a standout company for inclusion and diversity. Fourth is that we're going to have a unique and compelling culture that drives competitive advantage. We don't worship at the altar of culture. Culture is a capability to create competitiveness.

Reimer: What is your role with the board around culture?

Alziari: I'm very clear in my mind that as CHRO, I work for both the CEO and the board. I feel an accountability to both, and I hope that comes through in the way that I'm having discussions with both. The board has to have confidence that the CHRO is somebody who isn't just a spokesman for the company but someone who is going to give them truth and nuanced judgment on what's good and where we need to get better.

Every CHRO is going to share the engagement survey results or updates on inclusion and diversity, but in order for that to be more meaningful for the board, it's got to go beyond a presentation to a dialogue to engage honestly on touchy questions, so that there's a sense of full disclosure rather than managing the message.

Reimer: How has your history degree helped you in business?

Alziari: It's been really helpful. It forces you to develop critical thinking skills – the power of analysis to understand the underlying cause, and the perspective to determine what really matters. History is all about getting to a strategic perspective, and you can't do that if you are down in the weeds. It comes back to my point that the CHRO is going to be remembered for three or four things, so I have to stay at a high altitude. I can't be down in the weeds.

Bryant: If you were advising that same room of 100 CHROs about the one or two ways they're most likely to fail in this role if they're not thoughtful, what advice would you give them?

Alziari: One would be moving too quickly, and not taking the time to really understand and have a perspective on the issues and how they fit together. Another is that if you see your job as an HR job first, rather than as a senior leadership role, that will be a problem.

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gratification."

I've also seen some CHROs get seduced by the power. These are powerful jobs, and I've seen instances where that kind of plays to the ego. These are "stage left" roles. If you want the spotlight, try and become a CEO.

One barometer of my own success is if I've had a series of conversations with my CEO, and then one day he is front and center on stage and he's saying something that came from our conversation. If he's forgotten that it came from me, then I've been successful. In these roles, your reward is in heaven. It's not about ego gratification.

Bryant: What are your thoughts on the importance of listening in leadership?

Alziari: My theory on what successful leadership looks like has changed with each decade. I certainly went through a period of needing to be the smartest guy in the room, saying the most and dominating the conversation. Over time, I realized that it wasn't helping me achieve what I wanted in terms of outcomes.

Then I learned that observing others and listening to them is completely free learning. The point about learning from failure is true, but learning from other's people failure is much easier. I don't wish ill on anybody, but I do study what happens around me very carefully because then I can learn and course-correct.

Reimer: Looking back on your career, were there key mentors for you who imparted memorable lessons?

Alziari: In one of my early roles, the guy who ran international HR, who was far more senior than me, took me aside one day and gave me some very tough feedback. Do you remember that scene in *Goodfellas* where they open the trunk and they just keep stabbing the person in the trunk to make sure he's dead? In the moment, it felt like that.

But he really, really cared about me, and that was just his unique way of delivering a message. The reason he did it that way was because he didn't think I was going to hear it unless he was pretty stark about it. It was a real tough love moment.

The notion of tough love has shaped the way I talk to my own people. I tell them right up front, look, I grew up with tough love and you're going to experience some. It's really important that you remember both sides of that phrase because if you're just experiencing tough, it's going to feel sometimes like the dark side of the moon. If you believe that I've got your best interest at heart and the only reason I'm doing this is because I believe in you and I want you to be even better than you are, you will trust that I'm coming from a good place.

Bryant: If you could only ask somebody one question in a job interview, what would the question be?

Alziari: I'm going to cheat; the one I always ask comes in two parts. I ask people to think about the last three years and to tell me, on a scale

of one to ten – one is they should have asked you to leave and ten is nobody could have done it any better – how well have they done?

Then people give you a number, and it's often a high one, and I always say, "Tell me what gets you to that number?" I'm listening for whether they are talking about activities or outcomes and real accomplishments. If people say they are a seven and they've told you what they've accomplished, part two of the question is, what would have got you to ten? Do they have the ability to reflect and be reasonably objective about how well they've done and what more they could have done? And can they take that forward into the role that you're discussing with them?