



Carolyn Moore, SVP of People at Auth0



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"Culture Breaks Down When You're Not Paying Attention To It."

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***Carolyn Moore**, the senior vice president of people at **Auth0**, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**, in the latest installment of our Strategic CHRO interview series.*

Reimer: The CHRO role is challenging for many reasons, and one of them is that you're at the intersection of data and the unpredictability of human beings. How do you think about that balancing act?

Moore: I'm in Silicon Valley, and this is where my background is, so we've moved to using more people analytics and data. But the data are not always an accurate reflection of what's going on. It's a balancing act. We can't over-rotate, despite the tendency in tech to try to apply an algorithm to everything.

After all, people are people, and being empathetic is critical to squaring those two impulses. Be empathetic, look at the data, but then ask people questions about what's going to help them be more successful.

Bryant: Can you share an example in which you saw an over-reliance on analytics?

Moore: I won't mention the company, but in one case, we did a lot of work studying all kinds of metrics. We also did a lot of surveys. All of them were helpful, but we relied on

them too heavily. So for systems like performance management, we were looking at the numbers, like how many fours and fives we had in the organization. But it was an incomplete picture for engaging with the organization's success profile.

I was working with many technology people at the company, including quite a few PhDs, and they kept talking to me about building an algorithm to try and predict performance. I said, "Go right ahead. Give it a shot."

Three months later, they came back and said, "We can't do it." I said, "You know why? Because we're talking about human beings here. We cannot apply an algorithm to everything."

Reimer: You've been an HR leader in big legacy organizations and have transitioned into a smaller tech company. What advice would you give to an HR executive trying to make that transition, as well?

Moore: The difference is being able to get your hands really dirty. Even though I'm a CHRO, there are things I'm going to have to get very deep in, and that's important at a company of this size, with 850 employees.

The second thing is that you have to be very cognizant about scaling rapidly. I saw it to a certain degree at Apple, but it's different at that scale, because you have all your infrastructure and support.

You have to be very cognizant about scaling rapidly.

For a company of this size, you have to keep in mind that what is working at the current stage will have to change for the next phase of growth. It's a lot of plate-spinning. There are things you're worried about today, but at the same time, how are you going to make sure that it's all going to work down the road when we double in size?

You have to make some decisions now that will allow you to get there. I have what I'm working on for today, but I also have to know the three-year plan and keep that in mind.

Bryant: For HR leaders considering a move to a new company, what's your advice on how to make sure it will be a good fit?

Moore: It's critical to understand the culture, however you can do that. Do your research, talk to people, understand what the culture means. I've been a part of cultures that were genuine, and I've been part of cultures where the leadership decided to wordsmith for days and put values on a wall, but they didn't mean anything.

This is not just about checking out Glassdoor. This is about talking to people at the company and asking specific questions about how they know the culture is real. How do you know the culture is intentional? That's my most important question. I don't necessarily always ask it that way, but that is my question.

How do you know the culture is intentional?

If you're going to have a strong culture, you need to weave the values into everything you do — all your programs, all your communications, and how you treat people on a day-to-day basis. Culture breaks down when you're not paying attention to it.

It's not just about the people team paying attention. I see HR as playing a shepherding role, and being the conscience around the culture. But it starts from the top with the leadership team. I've been in cultures that tolerated the high-performing jerk. When leadership chooses to allow this kind of behavior, that's when it really breaks down because everyone sees the double standard.

Reimer: In learning more about your background, I read that you did improv comedy.

Moore: I used to do it quite a bit for about four years. One thing I learned from that was the "yes, and" approach. It's a huge thing. Improv has a lot of structure, believe it or not, and one key to it is that when somebody throws you an idea, you have to go with it and add to it. That's been super helpful for me in my career trying to generate more interesting and innovative ideas.

We are often so focused on getting stuff done. We move so quickly in this company that it's like building the plane in the air. That speed sometimes stops you from listening as much as you should. That "yes, and" adjustment is a good way to slow people down, get them to listen more and start thinking a little bit differently.

Sometimes somebody will throw out an idea, and I might share something really off the wall, and that starts getting the conversation going, often in an interesting and different direction.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you?

Moore: The biggest influence was my grandmother. She was an immigrant as a child from Poland and grew up in a very large family in the Midwest. But she was always a little different than the rest of the family.

She was always a little more adventurous, and she came to San Francisco when she got married. She was quite the pioneer, and married my grandfather, who was a traveling salesman, who always had something going on.

Even though she had an eighth-grade education, she was probably the smartest woman I have ever met. She and my grandfather ran a dry cleaning business in San Francisco, and I used to go there every day after school.

I learned business from my grandmother — how to treat people, listen to them and ask good questions. Sometimes when I'm faced with a challenge, I sit back and think about what my grandmother would do in this situation.