



Strategic CHRO

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I Always Challenge Myself And The Team To Imagine What Is Possible

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Cythia Burks



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Cynthia Burks, chief people and culture officer at Genentech, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: What are the leadership muscles you've built during the pandemic that you want to carry forward?

Burks: I've really had to practice what I've long preached to other leaders, which is to be comfortable with not having all the answers, and to be willing to share that with people. You have to be vulnerable to say, I'm not sure or I don't have an answer. We talk about the importance of leaders being able to do that, but it's easier to say in certain circumstances than to actually live it.

The second muscle is about always challenging myself and the team to imagine what is possible, and not to be constrained by the status quo. None of us could have imagined that there would be so many employees working remotely and that they would be incredibly productive.

In some cases, people have really thrived. I wasn't certain that was possible before it became our reality, and so I keep that lesson with me to make sure there are no constraints around possibilities and what's doable.

Bryant: What are important early influences that shaped you as a leader?

Burks: My father was a really big influence. He worked in a steel manufacturing factory his whole life, and he was a union steward. I remember going to the picket line with him when the union was protesting and I also remember his commitment to the employees he was representing.

He was once asked to go into management, and he refused because he felt that he couldn't continue to advocate for the younger guys that were starting their work lives in the factory. That really stuck with me and made me wonder, why does it have to be so adversarial?

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There should be an opportunity for people to come together around a common goal. Throughout my career, I have always felt that we need to understand what's going on with our employees and what their experiences are. We need to listen, and we need to advocate for them.

My father was also the kind of person who said you should just keep your head down and do great work, and that's all you need to do. It was helpful to me because it helped me to stay focused on what I really cared about. But in a corporate setting, it's not enough. You have to understand the importance of relationships, and you have to understand politics even if you don't want to be political.

Reimer: In what way is the reality of the CHRO role different from what you expected?

Burks: I was surprised by how much positional power I have in this role. That may seem obvious, but when I became CHRO, I still saw myself as just Cynthia contributing to the conversation. But because of my position, I saw that people thought, "Cynthia wants us to do this."

I think leaders often don't realize that their position can really have an impact on how they show up and how they engage and how they're seen by their team or the organization, even if that is not their intent or the way they see themselves.

So I had to really understand and be aware of the fact that people were paying attention to me, even when I didn't realize they were watching me. And I needed to be very conscious of the messages, intended or not, that I was sending not just to my team but to the entire organization.

Bryant: What are the most important X-factors you're looking at when you interview job candidates?

Burks: One of the most important is critical thinking. I want to know how someone thinks about things. Do they think deeply about issues? Do they peel back the layers to really understand what the true issue is? So I'll ask people to describe a complex issue they faced and how they diagnosed the problem to figure out what they needed to do.

I went to law school, and one thing that was so valuable is this idea of issue spotting and really quieting the noise to understand the key thing that we need to focus on. That's harder than people realize, but that is absolutely what we need to do, at every level of the company.

Reimer: We are having a lot of conversations these days with CHROs about the role of data in the HR field. Can you share your thinking?

Burks: We are a science-based company. We need to ground ourselves in facts and data and research. It is an important part of our culture, and that culture spills over into HR. It's hard when you're getting in front of a group of scientists to recommend a new initiative without it being based in data because that's the first question they'll ask.

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I believe that in the HR discipline generally, we have a long way to go. Part of the challenge is that we may have really great people analytics teams who do incredible work. But those insights have to be pulled through to the HR business partners to really drive and inform the work that they're doing throughout the company. The data may be interesting, but what does it really mean and how is it informing our decisions?

That more integrated approach, of connecting data with real experience and the context of the business, is what's really needed to really make progress in this area.

Bryant: How do you think about developing the next generation of HR leaders? What do they need to bring to the table?

Burks: I really believe that there has not been a more exciting time to be in HR than right now because it draws upon so many disciplines and experiences. And I would say for those who are coming up or may have an interest in HR, understanding social science is critically important.

I feel that we in HR are often not taking advantage of what is already out there in terms of knowledge and research, and we need to do a better job of drawing upon and applying the body of knowledge that exists to inform our work. At the core of it is understanding how and why people behave the way they do, and looking to history and established research to help us better predict behavior.

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I would also say that people should expect to be challenged by their leader in HR. My job really is to challenge people to come up with the best solutions, but also challenge them so that they can understand what they're capable of. So I ask really tough questions.

I think people know that I do it in the spirit of wanting to make the person and the company stronger. But I will push people to share the basis of their thinking so I can understand how they came up with their conclusion. Again, it's about making everyone better.

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