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There Are Huge Implications For HR In How People View Their Careers Today

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Jacqueline Welch

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

Jacqueline Welch, chief human resources officer at The New York Times, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: How have you evolved as a leader in the last two years?

Welch: I'm actually an introvert, though people who know me don't believe it. My rule is that if you're not going to go out and be wildly entertaining and engaging, then you should just stay home. No one's going to miss you. And so people only ever see me with high energy because I've prepared to be engaging.

I'm sharing this because historically my MO at work has been to engage with people in groups. That's the way I connect — it's the eye-to-eye contact, it's the shoulder tap. And so, over the last almost two years, I have had to learn how to be extroverted within the context of everyone working remotely. I've had to be very deliberate, particularly starting this job in early 2021, on how to make those connections when my usual tools aren't available.

One example of how I broke the proverbial ice was to have 20-minute video calls with every member of my team, and the two questions each time were, what do you most want to tell me, and what do you most want to know from me? They got to determine how they wanted to focus their answer — personal or work.

Prior to my arrival, the Times did an exhaustive assessment on DEI,

and one of the findings was that Black women here were the most vocal in terms of feeling disenfranchised and not part of the organization. And so I started hosting virtual "coffees with Jacqui" with only Black women — ten at a time, completely voluntary — just to say, I hear you, I see you, what do you want to tell me, what do you most want to know from me?

I'm here to be a steward of the organization and the institution, and also the ambassador of the employee experience. I had to be deliberate about making that initial connection with people.

Bryant: As a Black woman, what were some of the headwinds you had to navigate yourself as you were moving up in your career?

Welch: It's an important question and difficult to answer – relative to what? I've only ever been a Black woman. I started my career post-undergrad in retail, which was male-dominated in the early '90s. I went to a divisional meeting that I'll never forget. I might have been at the company for three months.

I walked into the room, and I was the only Black woman. I was probably ten years younger than the next youngest person in the room. At the time, I wore my hair in a very short, faded Michael Jordan-esque kind of haircut. People were not trying to be discreet as they looked at me. I just remember making a mental decision at that moment that while I don't know what's going on with any of these people, I'm not going to waste any time trying to figure it out.

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And if there's an issue, I assume they'll just let me know. That is the first and last time I ever thought about race in a concrete, specific, personal way. Turning that off in my head and depersonalizing things has allowed me to focus more on whatever outcome we're driving to on discussions about race, such as pay equity.

Reimer: Is there an angle on the conversation around the Great Resignation that you think needs to be highlighted more?

Welch: I spend a lot of time thinking about this. My parents are immigrants from Panama. My father is the poster child for the idea of having one job for your entire career, then a big retirement party, and that's it. In the Caribbean Latin culture, the thinking is, why would you leave a good job?

So when people started writing in the 1990s that Gen X would have six to eight jobs, I thought that was crazy. And while that didn't make any sense to me, I realized that the New York Times is my seventh role. I literally am the poster child for the Gen-Xers.

Now articles often talk about how the new generation of workers will have between ten and twelve unique employers, and you hear kids

talking deliberately about wanting to work for a place for two years and then move on. That has huge implications for HR.

What's learning and development if you're only going to have someone for two or three years? What's the value of succession planning if people aren't staying past two or three years, and what are the impacts of reduced tenure on standard offerings like LTIPs, RSUs and benefits? People need to talk about the implications of this profound shift in how people see their careers.

Bryant: We are in an age when employees increasingly feel like they should have a voice and vote in their companies' policies. How do you think about that?

Welch: I always say you should treat people like adults, and that you shouldn't conflate someone having an opinion with activism. A lot of companies worry that people speaking up means they have activist employees. To which I say, you have a thinking employee who's asking a question, so answer the question.

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You may have to provide context in the answer, like reminding them that our responsibility is to build long-term sustainable growth for the institution. I think a lot of organizations are too invested in having

satisfying answers as opposed to real answers and treating employees like adults. If the answer is that unsatisfying to the employee, then they have options, but this is what we stand for, and this is how we're going to execute on our strategy.

Reimer: How do you hire? What are the key questions you ask in interviews?

Welch: Why this job and why now? I have two broad categories for sorting their answers. There are people for whom the job is about them and their career mobility. And there are people who believe in the institution, they want to be part of the history and the legacy, and they want to leave it a better place than they found it.

And so you hire for purpose. Sometimes you do need the person who's hungry to make a name for themselves, but sometimes you need the institutionalist who cares about the place long beyond their tenure. So those are the screens that I'm constantly using. There's no judgment associated with either of them, but that helps provide clarity on who you're hiring and why.

Bryant: What drew you to the HR field in the first place?

Welch: The pull to HR happened at a very precise moment. I worked all the way through my years at Syracuse University, and there was a point where I did a co-op with the local Urban League. I worked in the employment department, which basically helped local residents find jobs.

It was me and the director of the department and a part-time assistant. And then the director had to go out on medical leave, and I became the interim director. I was probably 19 years old. The very first person I helped from the start of the process of finding a job through their landing a job and completing their probationary period was a very elegant Black man.

He came back to thank me after he concluded his 90-day probation with Yellow Freight trucking company, which was a big deal because he had a GED, and it was a union job with a good wage, medical, dental, vision, a 401(k), and a pension.

He was crying, and he said to me, “Thank you for giving me a way to provide for my family.” I decided at that moment that I wanted to be in personnel, as it was called back then. I was captivated by the idea of ensuring dignity in work and helping people provide for their families. I remember that moment like it was ten minutes ago.