



**Strategic CHRO**

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# Keeping Your Finger On The Pulse Of Your Company Is A Bigger Priority Now

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***Ashley Goldsmith, chief people officer at Workday, 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 leadership muscles have you built during the pandemic that you want to take forward with you?**

Goldsmith: I've grown as a leader and we've grown as a company in really figuring out how to motivate people to collaborate and innovate in a fully remote context. And we're going to need to figure out how to operate with that same effectiveness in a hybrid context, which I think will be harder. The agility that we needed in a fully remote environment is going to be really important as we transition to a hybrid context.

I'd also mention listening and compassion. I would like to think I had both of those before, but I've really improved at looking more for pockets of people or even individuals who need compassion. Both the pandemic and social justice issues that we've lived through over these last two years have brought to light that we are all impacted differently by the same events. I like the phrase that people have been using — that we're all in the same storm, but we're in very different boats.

Thinking about our employees as one homogenous group, or even as 20 different groups, just doesn't work. I have higher expectations of

myself, and I have higher expectations of our company, to be listening better and deeper so that we can really dig in and provide support where it's needed.

**Bryant: What are the approaches and tools you've used to do that?**

Goldsmith: It's the million little things versus the big things. Like knowing whether it makes more sense to do a video call or just an audio call because someone needs a break from Zoom. I've gotten better at knowing how to differentiate the two, but I err toward using video. It can be a pain sometimes, but seeing someone really matters.

Doing skip-level meetings and jumping into team meetings that I usually wouldn't attend is also effective. In the office, I might have passed people in the hall who are multiple levels down from me and had quick chats with them. That's not going to happen in an organic way now, so I ask to join the team meetings of managers deeper in my organization so I can get a chance to see them. I've always been a big believer in skip-level meetings, but I do a lot more of them now. Those really matter for staying connected.

**Reimer: How does effective HR look different in 2022 than it looked in 2019?**

Goldsmith: I'm a huge believer in data, and sentiment data in particular, and this notion of constantly keeping your finger on the pulse of your organization to know what's working and what's not working has become much more important.

Back in 2019, HR may have looked at things more in aggregate, but now that's not acceptable. We need to make sure we understand what's happening in the nooks and crannies and with small groups and with individuals. Those little puffs of smoke can become big fires in your organization. We can use data to our advantage to understand what's happening and know how to zero in and go after issues.

**Bryant: That brings up a current leadership challenge, which is to make employees feel like they are being heard while also making clear that the company is not a democracy. How do you think about that?**

Goldsmith: That certainly has become a new part of how we operate. At Workday, we really want to make sure we are hearing what people have to say. And we have found some success with making sure that people have a forum for discussing a particular issue. What are they asking for? What would they suggest to the company? And then we have the right leaders connect with them and understand what the ask is.

*You have to be clear on your principles.*

A solution can often emerge from the group, and then we can have a great discussion about where we go from there. But you have to be clear on your principles up front to guide those discussions. So if

someone asks why the company is not commenting on, say, the treatment of elephants in a certain part of the world, you can remind them of your decision criteria, including whether we have unique expertise on the topic or whether it directly impacts our employees.

### **Reimer: What's your take on the Great Resignation?**

Goldsmith: We've gone through so much. We had a year of complete stagnation and now we have an economy that is in overdrive. You combine the restlessness and the fatigue that so many people feel, and you add in a rocket-ship economy with a lot of unfilled roles, and it's logical that you're going to get a lot of people jumping around.

So we should be paying attention to it, and we should be all over our high performers and high potentials to make sure that they know we love them and that we want to keep them with the company. And we should be looking inside and thinking about how we tap into that restlessness and let those folks do something great within our company. That's where I focus.

We've found a lot of success with gigs — offering small, short-term assignments, and having a platform where people can apply for those. That way you can address one element of the Great Resignation by giving people a chance to do something new within your own organization versus letting them bounce to another company.

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## *performers and high potentials.*

That platform was in development before the pandemic. We had toyed with it because we've all known that people, particularly those earlier in their careers, like to learn, grow, and try new things. It's less about climbing the traditional career ladder and more about building new skills and having different experiences to build optionality. Within that context, we started developing the technology that would allow people to find these gigs, and allow managers and even individual contributors to put together these gigs.

Someone can say, "I need help with this project, and here's what it looks like, and here are the skills that someone would build, and here are the skills I really need you to have for this gig." And then individuals go search through all those open gigs to see what interests them and will allow them to build new skills or apply the skills they already have.

We've got folks doing everything from a two-week gig to a six-month gig, and the platform includes the time commitment required, whether it's 10 percent or 50 percent, in which case you need to check with your manager. A few years ago, if you had asked the average manager, "Are you willing to let your person spend part of their time with another team on something else?" I don't think you would have gotten a resounding yes. These days, their reaction is that they are all for anything that will help with retention.

**Bryant: What are other ways in which you help leaders think about the structural incentives and the scoreboard that they should be tracking to hold onto their people?**

Goldsmith: Most companies can look at their data and see how long in a position is too long for most functions or people. If someone is in the same position for between two and three years, they're probably reaching the point where they're going to leave if they don't do something different. If you share that data with your people leaders, you can really start to compel them to better understand the need to be proactive — that we risk losing that employee to another company, not just from the team they are on.

Also, for our people leader scorecard, we keep promotion and movement front and center. We have targets. We expect to see a certain amount of change on your team. If that's not happening, then we ask what's going on. This focus is particularly true today for diverse talent. Diverse talent is so highly sought after. If you're going to let them sit around and linger in a job for three years, they will leave.

**Reimer: What were important early influences that shaped who you are as a leader?**

Goldsmith: I grew up in very modest means with just my mom, and so there's a strong "don't forget where you came from" sense of humility with me. I was also pretty shy early on, but my confidence grew as managers promoted me into new roles. Those promotions scared the heck out of me at first, but I did them anyway. And seeing some

success really helped.

My mom didn't expect to be working. She was a teacher, then she was a housewife, and then all of a sudden the bottom dropped out, and so she was working nonstop. I was a typical latchkey kid. I certainly learned a lot about hard work by watching her, and she said many times to not let yourself become financially dependent on someone else, because she had been dependent. Make sure you've got your own bootstraps and you can pull yourself up.

Those notions of being self-reliant, and working hard and doing what it takes, came through loud and clear. I got my first job at 15, and I worked all the way through college. One of those early jobs was picking up medical waste from doctor, dentist and veterinarian offices and taking them to an incinerator. I'm a fairly petite person, and I was driving this huge white unmarked extended van, and it was always dark by the time I got to the incinerator. It was definitely an interesting job, but those are the things that build character.