



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

It's Critical To Prioritize. Being Busy Doesn't Mean Making An Impact.

Published on April 21, 2022



Kristen Ludgate



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

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

Reimer: There have been many profound changes for leadership and organizations these past two years. What stands out for you? What do you want to carry forward?

Ludgate: For all the complexity, it's also been very clarifying. The people and culture agendas are more important than ever. There is now cross-functional and business support, and these agendas are now seen as priorities. Given the skills shortage, digitalization and the speed of business, these issues have to stay front and center.

The second point is around pace and ambition. Before the pandemic, many companies were working on flexibility. We knew that's what people wanted, and there were conversations of what we could and should do. And then, boom, overnight we had to shift many people to working remotely. We realize that we can do things very differently and very quickly if we're forced to. How do we use that as a competitive advantage?

The third thing is the importance of building people's needs into your strategy. It's been such a grueling time. We've all had unprecedented challenges but the silver lining is that we've gotten to know people better. The empathy quotient has grown, and that's something we need

to hang onto.

Bryant: What is it about your wiring, your background, that makes you suited for leading in this moment of relentless disruption?

Ludgate: I love change. And I'm driving change in my role every day. My background as a lawyer helps because I've done a lot of crisis management over the course of my career so I like the high volume of problems that are unique and yet similar, and I like trying to figure out how you get better at navigating them over time.

A deep sense of curiosity is super-important. I always say that for leadership, you need three things — capacity, curiosity, and courage. You need to manage your own capacity, you need to be deeply curious all the time, and you do need to be courageous because you have to be able to take stands and make decisions with incomplete information.

Reimer: Employees increasingly feel like they deserve a voice and a vote in setting policies, and that's a tricky balancing act for leadership right now. What is the framework you bring to that?

Ludgate: Employees don't just want more participation — they want more transparency. Leaders have to be much more willing to share information in real time without massaging or corporatizing it. We have to be courageous and share when we're doing well, and share when we're not doing well.

You also have to ask for feedback. We have a rigorous approach at HP

of listening to our employees' needs through pulse surveys. But you have to be prepared to change. That's the big lesson. You can't listen just to listen. You have to listen with some humility, and if you take their input and take action to change when necessary, you will gain trust from employees. This will also build credibility for moments when employees may have questions about the company's approach.

You can't listen just to listen.

And you have to articulate and anchor in your company's values. We have been learning a lot as we weather each disruption that there isn't a silver bullet for everything. The important thing is to say you're sorry when mistakes happen and to keep working to find solutions.

I should say my approach on this has evolved over the years. Particularly as a lawyer, the thinking years ago was to be cautious, don't share too much information. Now, it's the opposite. The risk is that if you're too controlling of how you're communicating with your people, you actually create risk. You don't diminish risk. It's a very interesting time.

Bryant: Given all that's on your plate, how do you focus your time and mindshare?

Ludgate: Wouldn't it be great if there was a nice orderly answer to that question? The first thing is realizing that you have many different jobs when you sit in this chair, and the people in the various components of

your job don't necessarily have visibility to the other components. Your HR team may not realize how much time you're spending with the board, with the C-suite, and with the CEO.

You have to very quickly figure out the burning issues that are going to need your attention and the things that you need to unlock for your agenda. When you're new, you have to establish credibility with the CEO and the board in order to do what you need to do for the function.

You have to assess your strengths as an HR team and what you need to get better at, just like any other functional leader role. But remember that HR has been on the front lines of change now for two years, so HR has also been absorbing everybody else's needs.

It's critical to have measurable outcomes to help prioritize.

What I've learned over the two years, and I was never very good at it before, is that I need to make sure I spend time on things other than work. I need to read books and go for walks. I had to reacquaint myself with a decent sleep schedule. And it's counterintuitive because there's more to do than ever, but in order to do it all, you have to refill the well so you can be there for your people. And you have to tell your team that they need to give themselves permission to do the same thing.

I also learned as a lawyer, and I've carried this into HR, is that you need to focus on outcomes. In business line roles, you have a P&L and

targets, and teams get energy from going after those goals. So how can you help your HR team to identify outcomes that you can go after? Diversity, equity and inclusion are great examples, because you can set measurable goals.

It's critical to have measurable outcomes to help prioritize. We need to change our mindset in this new era of work where life and work are blending and burnout is high: being busy doesn't mean making an impact. You don't want "busy" for your team. You want people to say, wow, look what we did this year.

Reimer: What were important early influences in your life?

Ludgate: I grew up in a small paper mill town of 3,000 people in rural Maine. I wouldn't have even known about a job like mine when I was growing up. That's one reason my career path feels so bizarre. When I was younger, I just thought you got jobs so you could pay the bills.

Two big influences are that I've been a constant reader my whole life, and I'm indiscriminate about it. It can be US Weekly or the New York Times or a thriller. And I've always been very involved in the arts. I used to play music, and using that other part of your brain is helpful over time. Music really taught me the importance of practice. You have to keep trying every single day to get better. And that's what I tell my team.

Be sure to subscribe [here](#) to get all our Strategic CHRO interviews.