



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

You're Always Dealing With Situations With No Clear Right or Wrong Answer

Published on March 29, 2022



Christy Lake



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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

Christy Lake, chief people officer of Twilio, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview. Subscribe [here](#) for future interviews.

Reimer: What leadership muscles have you built over the last two years that you want to carry forward?

Lake: The primary muscle that's been built over the last two years is agility. In addition to taking care of the systems of people and leadership and organizational health, we've also had to be the chief health, safety, and risk officer. We are the chief well-being officer. We are the chief purpose officer. And so on.

It's about being able to operate in the vast unknown, and understanding that the thing that we have decided on today may have to be undone in two to three weeks. As you become more senior, you have to practice "bifocal leadership." You need to be able to look over the horizon while being able to focus on what's right in front of you. You have to do both.

Bryant: What is it about your background, your upbringing, your DNA, that makes you able to not only survive in this kind of environment, but also thrive?

Lake: Not too get too dark on you too quickly, but when I was in my early 20s I was in a terrible car accident. I have a pretty substantial scar that spans almost half my neck. That experience instilled in me what

life and death means.

And while not everyone needs to have a near-death experience to have that happen, this role does require a lot of adaptability. Even before the pandemic, we were always needing to be responsive, because there's always something going on in the organization. You have to be able to filter for the truly important, and determine the level of attention that everything else needs. You need to be the calm person when the storm is raging.

Reimer: At a tactical level, how do you process the 180 things that could be your priorities?

Lake: I use the same product roadmap language that our developers use. We talk about how the feature request list is very long, and we will assess our quarterly objectives and say, "Has something new come up that's more urgent?" You always have to have some extra capacity to respond to some unexpected dynamic.

*You've got to speak the
language of the business.*

I don't mean to suggest it's a perfect science, but we do have an agile way of looking at things and saying, "Not now, not yet." On some level, you've got to speak the language of the business. It's helped provide a framework so that the business can understand the work that we do and understand that we work in cycles, as well.

Bryant: Another challenge is balancing the voice of employees in decision-making. What is your framework for that?

Lake: I've long said that EX is the new CX — the employee experience is the new customer experience, in that companies really need to pay attention to it and have a pulse on it. That's not a new trend, but there is no avoiding it now in the time of the pandemic. When companies were called upon to have a point of view on things like wellness, childcare, it wasn't enough to say, "Oh, here's our benefits platform. You figure it out." We really heard from our people, who said, "This is where we're struggling, and this is what we need help with."

So while the trend had been there, it's been really accelerated. Broadly, what you see in the Great Resignation is, on some level, like a character assessment of the nature of relationships between employer and employee. The power balance has radically shifted. Now, people are saying, "No more. That's not for me. These are the terms of how I'm going to work." Companies either will or won't take that message, and they will or won't figure out that you have to listen to your employees.

So that balancing act you asked about starts with understanding what your people want. And then it comes back to the center of who we are as a company. What are our values? What do we stand for? So in the context of who we are as a company, the business, the industry, the locations we're in, you have to make the best possible decisions for the company, keeping in mind that employees are one of your biggest stakeholders.

Reimer: What's the most important quality you're looking for when you hire?

Lake: Is this person curious? Because if you're not curious, you're not going anywhere. You're not going to learn. You're not going to understand what the problems are. You're not going to understand what your own gaps might be.

*If you're not curious, you're
not going anywhere.*

If you do not have a natural or learned disposition around curiosity, you're not going to be good at your job. I can't think of a single job where curiosity isn't a differentiator.

Bryant: What were key early influences from your childhood that shaped who you are today?

Lake: My father was sort of a boundaryless person. He would say, "You can do anything." He brought a lot of logic and a lot of unbridled determination and fortitude to things. My mother, by contrast, is averse to change, and I always bumped up against her.

So from an early age, I was always this annoyingly logical little kid who would always say, "But why?" Or, "Why not?" So you would find a lot of curiosity from an early age, and I rejected anything that was presented to me as "this the way it has to be." I was always seeking out

a path that made sense to me based on fact and logic and observation.

I bring a lot of that to the work that I do today, because you're always hit with these situations where there is no right and wrong. Maybe you have some pattern recognition because you've seen something before, but challenges are always new in some way.

So you've just got to have a way to assess and to analyze and to have a point of view. That has been consistent from the time I was an annoying kid, when my mother would say, "Just do what I say," and I would always ask, "But why?"

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