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# Empowerment With Accountability: How To Push Down Decision- Making?

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

**Reimer: What is the big-picture question that you feel is top-of-mind for the HR profession right now?**

Davis: Returning to the office is obviously a hot topic, and it raises a broader question around culture, how we work and how we experience work moving forward. We can't necessarily replicate what we used to experience when we were physically together full-time, so there has to be new ways to think about forming connections.

How do we include people? How do we connect with one another, knowing that hybrid is here to stay? And how do we balance flexibility with the importance of coming together regularly in-person to maintain our collaborative spirit and innovative culture?

Another big part of culture is how we perform the work, and how easy or hard it is for people to do their jobs. I firmly believe that people will stay at a company where they feel that they can be productive and make an impact. If they're frustrated because they can't — or if there's too

much viscosity in the system making it hard to get something done, which can happen in big, complex organizations — then people will leave.

So how do you structure work and ruthlessly prioritize to ensure that people feel they're making a difference and are focused on what's most important? Since the pandemic, that's become more important than ever.

**Bryant: How do you think about how your role is changing, and needs to change, for this new environment?**

Davis: Certainly, we're seeing that HR has a bigger seat at the table than ever before. It's a great opportunity, but it's also somewhat intimidating because none of us have all the answers. It's incredibly tumultuous, and not just because of the pandemic. There's something new every day in terms of political and societal issues. And there's a greater expectation from employees and also job candidates that companies have a point of view on topics that we never used to need to have a point of view on. People are more vocal about those topics, too.

It's so easy in this job to be reactive about whatever may seem most urgent at the time — especially lately, when there's a lot of emotion wrapped up in the issues that people are raising. Discerning the urgent from the important is really key. You have to step back and say, what are all the different sides of this issue, and what do they mean for the organization? What are the implications for the next five to ten years? These are really interesting challenges. There's never a right or wrong

answer. It does require thinking much further into the future.

**Reimer: What is it about your background that prepared you to operate in an environment with so much complexity and ambiguity?**

Davis: I tend to operate on logic, so I don't get too immersed in the emotional side of things. My educational background is in organizational psychology. When I was in college, my dad worked in a gold mine, and my summer job was working in the gold mine because they had a student program.

Through that experience and learning about psychology, I became very interested in what makes people tick. In that environment, some people were taking breaks every 30 minutes, whereas others were working really hard through their entire shift. I wondered, "What's the difference here? What motivates people? How do you set up an environment and a system to further that motivation? What behavior does this system drive?"

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wrong.*

I became really interested in organizational development, design, and process improvement. I loved thinking through the mechanics of the system and how all the parts interact. I don't operate with the idea that

there's a right and a wrong. It's all about shades of gray and it depends on what you're trying to optimize for.

Depending on that, you have to think about how the whole system drives behavior toward the outcomes you want. It sets me up well for this role because everything's a puzzle. It's a question of, what are we actually trying to accomplish here and what's the best way to get it done?

**Bryant: How has your leadership style evolved over the last two and a half years?**

Davis: I definitely leaned into vulnerability and compassion more — I think we all did through the pandemic. At the same time, we have to balance empathy with ensuring we have a sustainable business. There's a lot that we want to give and do, and people are going to be asking for more. So we need to be more judicious about deciding how we support people, and then be really transparent with why we are or are not going to do something that they may be asking for.

Also, I learned that we really needed to further prioritize. In our company, we have a lot of passionate people who often say yes because they want to please, accomplish and be good partners. At some point you just have to say no. You have to decide what's a lower priority and what does not need to be done.

**Reimer: How do you think about the role of data in HR?**

Davis: For whatever reason, we really haven't cracked the nut on good people data. I've been in HR for 25 years and I feel like these are evergreen questions – What's the right data? How do we get the data? How do we gather data that's more leading instead of lagging? Can we perform predictive analytics?

That said, it's critical that we use data, and it's important that you don't step outside the bounds of what the data is telling you. When I was studying organizational psychology, psychometrics was a big part of my education, and that includes knowing how to interpret the data and speak the facts about the data objectively.

**Bryant: What are the most important X factors you're looking for in leaders now?**

Davis: A big focus for us is creating more agility in our business. The market is changing quickly and we need to adapt. What's become apparent is that curiosity, an openness to learning, and flexibility to adapt are becoming more important. We need to be able to think differently and not be complacent about the ways we've always done things.

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We've also been talking more about empowerment with accountability.

How do you push decisions down to the people closest to the work, rather than having to escalate every decision through a chain of command? If you give people space and autonomy, they'll rise to the occasion. But they have to be willing to take up that empowerment and flex and learn.

**Reimer: What were early influences that shaped how you lead today?**

Davis: I've always been a competitive person, but it's a quiet competitiveness. I was very introverted growing up. I loved school, and I loved learning. But I also played every sport there is. I just loved getting out there and competing.

What I've learned over time is how to be more outspoken. I love to take in information and observe and process. Sometimes it takes me some time to share my thoughts. So I'm learning to share my opinion more often. I still don't love being out in front. That's not my comfort zone. But that's definitely something I'm leaning into.

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