



Leading Through Disruption

Powerful conversations with prominent leaders on navigating this era of relentless change



Friederike Hohenstein

Communication Is Key To Driving And Owning The Narrative Of Change



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February 15, 2023

Friederike Hohenstein**, global human resources director at **Barnes**, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**, in our latest "Leading Through Disruption" interview. **Subscribe [here](#) to receive future interviews.

Lauterbach: What is a top-of-mind challenge for you right now?

Hohenstein: Before COVID, I had the feeling that we needed to shift our leadership style from primarily IQ to a balance with EQ. Then COVID hit and it somehow created momentum for everyone to really understand, "Oh, we need

to be more emotional leaders and we need to understand our people and shift our mindset."

Now, as restrictions loosen up and people start returning to the office, I am seeing some leaders returning to operating as if we were back in 2019, and adopting old ways of managing people. Given the uncertainty and economic challenges we are facing, many leaders are trying to cope with this environment through control.

But people are not the same. They enjoy their flexible lifestyle, including choosing when they want to work. They don't want managers setting rigid rules, because they've shown that they can be empowered to deliver results on their own. So we need to focus on emotional leadership approaches more than before. Control does not work in the post-COVID work environment.

Reimer: How do you define "emotional leadership," and what is your approach to helping executives develop it?

Hohenstein: We need leaders who are more focused on inspiring others. When you think about leadership development, you have to create a safe space to address core topics that most leaders are not used to talking about. And then create awareness about why these subjects are important.

Sometimes leaders don't think enough about communicating.

The culture of organizations before COVID was based on working in a particular space together – you'd go to the office, have a coffee, meet your different colleagues, and that's the place where culture happened. Now culture is really the work itself. What are you working on? How are you working on it? Which tools are you working with? And this is a complete mindset shift that leaders need to understand.

Sometimes leaders don't think enough about communicating, and communication is key to driving and owning the narrative of change. Many leaders will want to put that responsibility on HR. And I tell them that this is a company journey, not an HR journey.

Lauterbach: We are seeing different generations with different expectations of culture and careers. How do you think about that?

Hohenstein: I completely agree. I am a millennial, and when I started leading HR, I was always the youngest one at the table, and I brought different perspectives and approaches — more curious and perhaps more bold. I really like to try new things. I want to have an impact.

But I also see a lot of my peers who are focused on work-life balance and they want to go home at 5 p.m. Baby boomers clashing with Gen Z and millennials is a huge topic. It's easy to address if you explain the different needs and expectations around loyalty. Younger employees may join the company, create some kind of skill set that they can only earn in this kind of environment, and then they are good to go.

They may be here for two years and then want to go somewhere else to have another great learning experience. While this may present new challenges for managers, on the other hand, it will attract other talent to our organization. This is a cultural setting that I think is — hopefully — future-oriented. And within that context, it's more important to understand employees' reasons for leaving, rather than to look at their departures as a commentary on the company.

This is just a long journey, and we're just at the first stage.

So when you talk about building a tribe and a sense of culture, it requires a new mindset. A good example is McKinsey. If you go to McKinsey, you work really hard and then you can leave after two years. Other employers will want to hire you because they know that you are very skilled and well-trained. All companies should adopt this approach. We need to be like a school of excellence — people join the company to build new skills and then they are good to go. This approach will help attract other talent.

This is part of that tension between micromanaging and pushing for results on the one hand, and on the other hand giving people more freedom and flexibility. It's a big mental

change. This is just a long journey, and we're just at the first stage, and maybe we have ten different stages ahead of us. We just have to be more open to new ways of working.

Even in challenging circumstances, we can deliver results without micromanaging. But you need to create some connectedness to the company that is different from the way we used to do it. Top-down approaches are dead. That style no longer works because you need to engage with today's employees and give them a voice. They have to co-create decisions and they have to implement processes. That's a way to create a trusting relationship.

Reimer: Given that point, how do you develop frameworks for assessing leadership effectiveness or performance now?

Hohenstein: That's a good question, and we haven't figured out the right benchmark. With so many people working remotely, it's easy to manage up and show good results and create the impression that you're completely in control of what's going on with your team. But what are the best measures to determine whether this is reality or if someone is just telling a nice story? We need to be more people-centric. It's important to engage the team and get some critical feedback.

Every leader and manager has a responsibility to take care of the workforce, and we have to find the best way to measure that. Is it just attrition? That doesn't seem as relevant, given that many people leave their jobs for different reasons now, and not only because they didn't like their manager. At a time when the war for talent is so challenging, it's time to develop better KPIs for employee engagement. What are the right dimensions to measure with surveys?

Lauterbach: How did you get interested in HR?

Hohenstein: Looking back, it must have been during my PhD studies when I realized that scientists are so different and that to really motivate them one had to first understand why they are driving for results, and how differently they work, and how differently they might define success from me. That's a fascinating leadership challenge we all face now in every organization and culture.

But science is a very good example probably because it does not really measure success by concrete KPIs. It's not about volume or revenue. It's just about creating impact through a paper and contributing meaningfully within a scientific community.

I started my first leadership position when I was 26 years old and in science, and I realized that I have to challenge myself, I have to understand the best levers to use for the scientists who were doing the work. It was very interesting having to figure out the key to motivating them in a very non-hierarchical organization. Solving that puzzle in different organizations and contexts is something that still drives me.

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