



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.



Suzan Morno-Wade, CHRO of Xerox

# We Need Leaders To Demonstrate Courage And Be Part Of The Solution



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*Suzan Morno-Wade, CHRO of Xerox, 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: How have you evolved as a leader over the last three years?**

Morno-Wade: I've reflected much more about what it means to be the chief people officer for a company. These last few years have put a whole new spin on what it means to be responsible for a big part of over 20,000 people's lives.

I come from a finance background. I'm much more

analytically inclined. So the human aspect of HR was a muscle that became much more pronounced in the last few years. It has made me a better leader.

**Bryant: What have been the trickier balancing acts of leadership for you?**

Morno-Wade: There have been several. But at the start of the pandemic, many organizations like ours found our entire business models turned upside down. And we had to balance decisions that affected our shareholders and employees in different ways. What guided us through those very difficult decisions were our values. And those are conversations that the CHRO needs to lead. And I'm happy to do that because that is my role.

**Reimer: What is it about your background that prepared you for navigating all these endless new challenges?**

Morno-Wade: I absolutely love challenges. And that's not to say that I necessarily liked all the ones that we were handed to us in the last few years. But I like being able to make an impact—on the business, the strategy, people's lives and careers. Those give me a lot of intrinsic motivation. Over my career, I was always the one who would run to projects and challenges that other people ran from.

This role is not for the faint of heart. This is not a role for someone who thinks this is solely about talking to people. This is a role that requires you to make tough decisions, and there's a lot of complexity. Unlike accounting, there's nothing black and white about this.

**Bryant: Where does that resiliency come from?**

Morno-Wade: My immigrant parents are a big part of it. They were educated but they came to the United States with very little. My mother spoke French and Spanish, but she didn't know English. There is something about having parents who have overcome so much to be able to recreate and build a life. There is a certain level of expectations that they have of their children.

**Reimer: This period has required leaders and managers to navigate so many new and difficult conversations. Your perspective on that challenge?**

Morno-Wade: The demarcation between the personal and professional life is gone. And George Floyd's murder and other such events have opened up conversations about racism. I don't believe we have equipped our middle managers to handle those. And I've had leaders say to me, "I didn't learn this in school or business school." And I said to them, "You're right. You didn't. None of us learned this in school."

■ This role is not for the faint of heart.

We need to focus more attention on middle managers, because they're the ones who have been most squeezed by everything. They're getting all the pressures from the top—more responsibilities, and often fewer resources to deal with them. They need the support to navigate these issues on a day-to-day basis.

It's about having conversations about performance. It's about helping people understand the strategy and where their employees fit in it. It's about responding to the single mother who needs time and flexibility at home. We do need to offer more support to managers across the board.

During the pandemic, we held what we called manager forums—a regular cadence of sessions that managers could join to hear from subject-matter experts and also from their peers on a whole host of topics. That was powerful. Now we're talking about how we continue to upscale and provide more resources for managers.

**Bryant: One of the consistent themes we are hearing in our interviews is the need for people to have more courage to make decisions and to bring a point of view to the table. All this uncertainty can leave people feeling paralyzed.**

Morno-Wade: We recently held our senior leadership team meeting with our top 100 people. I presented on leadership, and the visual I used was of two pictures. One showed a man standing at a boardroom table surrounded by other middle-aged white men, and the man who was standing was pointing at them and telling them what to do.

The second visual showed a very diverse group. There was no table, and they were talking as a group. The point of course is that the command-and-control leadership approach has given way to a more distributed model of leadership.

This is what we need. We need people to bring their ideas forward and work as a team to solve problems, and we need to change our ecosystem to encourage that. If we need and want leaders to be part of the solution, they're going to have to demonstrate courage and be part of those conversations.

**Reimer: If you fast-forward ten to fifteen years, what HR systems and processes will have to change?**

Morno-Wade: I think there will be more customization and individualization of what people want and expect in the work environment. That might be in terms of benefits and time off, for example.

There will be more customization and individualization.

I think we will see the same for learning. When people finish school and enter the work world, a lot of structured learning goes away. People need to continue to learn, to develop, to improve, and that needs to be built in very early in their career. I don't know what that looks like, but I think there will be more learning experiences as opposed to a more episodic approach.

**Bryant: What will be required of the next generation of CHROs?**

Morno-Wade: A CHRO has to have strong business and financial acumen. There's no way you can have a conversation in the boardroom or with the leadership team without an understanding of the hydraulics of the business and what drives the business, because we make so many decisions that impact the financials.

Having relationships with your company's directors is also crucial. I don't know how you can step into this role without having those board relationships. I was in the TR (total rewards) role for 20 years, and spent a lot of time presenting

to boards. That teaches you the nuances and the politics of boards, including knowing what needs to happen before and after the board meeting. To be most effective in this role, it is important to have some experience working with boards.

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