



Leading Through Disruption

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



Jen Vanderwall

"I Enable My Team To Own And Run Parts Of HR Like A Business"



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May 4, 2023

***Jen Vanderwall**, Chief People and Culture Officer at **Capitolis**, 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: How did you end up in a Chief People Officer role in the first place?

Vanderwall: I was in general business in the first fifteen years of my career. I started in insurance, worked in consulting, and then in product. I had great sponsors and jumped at opportunities until about ten years ago. I noticed this zig-zag of roles and decided to be more intentional about what I wanted to do.

A clear pattern emerged. Whenever I was in a new position, I clarified the business goals and reviewed performance against them. In about a minute, I dug into the org design and responsibilities, assessed who the strong performers were, and started to create a people plan. People and culture have always been my serious passions.

I made a significant career change and moved to Bridgewater Associates. Employee benefits was my first function. I quickly expanded into compensation, employee relations, and more. Today, I am focused on defining and enabling effective cultures and building outstanding leadership teams.

Reimer: What does the best-in-class HR function look like?

Vanderwall: Before you decide on the building blocks of the HR function, you need to figure out what the company needs to be successful, understand what's going well vs. not, and set clear priorities. When I first joined Capitolis, we grew rapidly. Building a solid foundation – including tools and systems – was paramount for scaling.

Today, I partner with the executive team to drive organization and leadership effectiveness. As Chief People and Culture Officer, I enable my team to own and run parts of HR like a business, be it talent acquisition, performance management, benefits & compensation, or analytics. This enables my team members to have a seat at the table. Every success in a company happens through people.

Lauterbach: How have our conversations about what culture means shifted or evolved over the last few years?

Vanderwall: Culture is not an "HR thing," but spans across everything. It is about how people operate, how they work together, and how they solve problems. In my first year at my current company, my job was as an observer and a student of what made us successful to date. I interviewed many of my colleagues — not just executives, but top performers who are examples of good culture fits for the company.

Imagine a whiteboard filled with words. Over time, common

themes emerged. We honed them down to nine People Attributes that are key to being successful in our organization. We then simplified them further to just three buckets – "Super Smart, Badass, and Good Humans." We assess people against these attributes when we hire and develop them.

What I love about this simple grouping of three is that people can remember them, and I find that most people can identify which one to two areas they are strongest and isolate the third where they have opportunities for development.

Our People Attributes are closely linked to our Company Values. These values come directly from our founder's heart and experience and similarly represent what has made us successful and what we need to be like to achieve our big goals. We continuously come back to test them as new cases present themselves.

Reinforcing them is like constantly beating a drum. It is constructive to train new people as they come on board and to remind those with long tenure how we do it. We also put ourselves out there clearly and authentically so people can see our culture and decide if it's the place for them.

Lauterbach: How do you interview at Capitolis? And is interviewing an art or a science?

Vanderwall: Interviewing is probably both art and science. I try to be as authentic as possible immediately to allow candidates to touch and feel our culture and decide whether it fits them well. People who are strong at a particular thing can see this thing in others. If higher-level strategic thinking is critical for a role, a higher-level strategic thinker needs to be doing that interview.

I want to find people who will continue to grow and evolve.

My secret questions are not about particular topics or knowledge areas. I would say, "Hey, I'm going to take two minutes to introduce myself and tell you who I am, and then I'd love you to do the same." Some people can be concise

and tell a straightforward story, and some won't see a forest through the trees.

I listen and notice how candidates think. Some people are very linear, which is excellent for some roles, such as dealing with processes. It might not be ideal for more creative and strategic positions, which may require more lateral thinking. I provide feedback like, "I feel pretty confident about A, B, and C. I have some open questions about D," and I'll ask what candidates think about that synthesis. You learn if the interviewees are open-minded and authentic, if they listen and are interested in what you say. The people who share our values lean into that and are curious.

I often confront candidates with a problem we are experiencing or something they have never dealt with before. Some people feel they must have an answer. Some will expose their thinking and explain a good framework for their approach. But I am not looking for perfection. I want to understand what people are like. I want to find people who will continue to grow and evolve.

Reimer: What skills does the future workforce need?

Vanderwall: I would go with resilience, the ability to accept and cope with change, and have a good way of understanding and solving problems rather than a strong opinion or direct answer. Not having all the answers can feel liberating. It calls for open-mindedness and collaboration and leads to better outcomes.

Another aspect is human and machine interactions. Our world is moving toward automating as much as possible and using machines for what they're great at, such as repeatable work. People need to design and oversee these machines, exercising judgment, developing metrics, and iterating things. Whenever I think of the development of young people on the job and in schools, I think about building those muscles to oversee, design, operate, and iterate machines.

Finally, perpetual learning and evolution. As technology becomes even more sophisticated, we need to be nimble to evolve and adjust while learning about ourselves, gathering new skills, and exploring new ways to hone our abilities.

Lauterbach: What were important early influences for you?

Vanderwall: I grew up with a very conceptual father who was an engineer. We were very close. I would call him on my way home from work with a specific question, and he would answer me with a metaphor like, "That's exactly like Schrodinger's cat." He stretched my thinking.

My mom has always been a very social creature, fascinated by people. I kind of evolved into a translator between my parents. When I started my career, I realized I could simplify things and engage with people. I drew a lot on a whiteboard with shapes and colors to increase understanding and engagement between people. This quality was good for strategy roles, change management, and executive coaching.

My passion is helping people understand themselves. What are their strengths? What's holding them back? One of my favorite concepts from Ray Dalio's *Principles* is "Dreams + Reality + Determination = A Successful Life." Helping people understand what they want and what they're like, while supporting their growth and evolution, is so important to me.

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