



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR



Sreeni Kutam

## "You Have To Create The Right Context For People To Be Innovative"



Adam Bryant [in](#)

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*Sreeni Kutam, the former CHRO at ADP who is now the company's president of global product and innovation, shared his 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 did your background in HR, including serving as CHRO of ADP, prepare you for your current role leading product and innovation?

**Kutam:** I would say HR is a prerequisite for any C-suite role, period. Broadly speaking, the two levers that senior leaders have are dollars and people. So having experience in an HR function is going to allow you to understand the cultural

elements and how to pull the levers the right way, including through compensation and incentives. As a leader, you have to create the right context for people to be innovative.

**Bryant: If you were advising someone stepping into their first CHRO role, what lessons would you share from your experience?**

Kutam: You have to work on your board dynamics and board relationships. As a CHRO, you are as much of an advisor to your CEO and your C-suite partners as for your board. So having that trust with the board is one priority. It won't happen on day one, but you have to be strategic with how you spend time with key board members.

Second, your relationship with the CEO is key, because people will only come to you if they know the CEO comes to you. That's the hard truth. No MBA school teaches you this, but that's how humans behave. Your power as a CHRO is derived from the extent to which your CEO speaks to you.

You cannot win outside if you don't win in your own home.

Third is your relationship with your HR team. You cannot win outside if you don't win in your own home. If your HR team follows you, they will say nice things about you when you are not in the room. The HR leaders who work directly for you are supporting your peers on the leadership team, and so your HR team is your microphone. They will speak nicely about you if they trust you, and your peers will trust you as a result.

**Reimer: What is your playbook, your approach, to leadership?**

Kutam: It's a "5P" model. The first P is purpose. What is the group's purpose? It's important for everybody to be philosophically aligned. In my view, the purpose of HR is to create and sustain a competitive advantage for the company through its people practices.

The second one is priorities and the third is people. Who are the people who will execute on those priorities? Do you have the right people? Do you have the right number of people

assigned to those priorities?

The fourth one is process. What are the friction points between the groups of people to get the priorities done? Are you clear about which processes need to be worked on? If you get those first four right, then you will get the performance you want.

**Bryant: What were early influences that give you the ability to handle all the uncertainty and disruption in these leadership roles now?**

Kutam: Challenges are all relative. I grew up in a middle-class environment in India. I lost my father just as I graduated from university. Suddenly, I was responsible for feeding my family and I didn't have a job. I've learned that whenever I'm facing a challenge or problem, I break it down into its smallest components, prioritize them and then solve them. That's my model. I feel I'm leading a blessed life, compared to where I started.

**Reimer: Can you share a bit more about what you did after your father passed away?**

Kutam: I didn't know what to do. I needed a job. I had just got a computer science degree and I didn't know how to move forward. Luckily, my roommate's father was the head of a local college. This was in 1992, and they were starting more college courses on computer science. When my friend's father heard what I was going through, he said, "Maybe he can teach some Introduction to Computer Science classes in my college."

It was not much money, but at that time it was a godsend, to just put food on the table. I did that for a year and a half, and then came to the United States a few months later as a programmer in a steel plant in Hammond, Indiana.

**Bryant: What is a key leadership lesson you've learned?**

Kutam: When you are not in the room, people are still making judgments on your capability as a professional. And why, for example, would anybody say a good thing about me? The reason is that I helped them, so they may feel inclined to help me.

So the more unselfish a person is, the better returns they get. It's very non-intuitive. My lesson in life is that the more unselfish I've been, the more that my career took off.

**Reimer: How do you hire?**

Kutam: If I am hiring a direct report for my team, the most important thing is my enthusiasm after the interview. Am I running outside of my office to tell somebody, "This person is incredible"? Second, am I going to learn something from this person? In terms of attributes, I look for passion, curiosity, hard work and character.

**Bryant: If you could ask somebody only one question in a job interview, what would that one question be?**

Kutam: I would ask, "What are you passionate about?" I don't care what they are passionate about, but I am looking for how they answer the question. I want to see their passion. That means they believe in something and they're willing to work for it. I respect that in an individual, whatever it is. I just want somebody who is passionate about something.

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