



Carolyn Roach

A Challenge For HR: Preparing Managers to Lead Holistically



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Carolyn Roach, CHRO of transportation company **XPO**, 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 do you see as top-of-mind challenges for HR, now and just over the horizon?

Roach: The ongoing challenge of the labor market is one. How do you get the best talent at the right speed and efficiency, and get them to stay in your organization when there are so many options for people? How do you differentiate yourself as an employer? How do you get that

talent not only to come, but then to stay? How do you re-recruit your employees every day? What is the value proposition that differentiates you from others? All that is a challenge and will continue to be a challenge.

The focus on the whole person is another. We are asking managers to take a much more holistic approach. You can't just care about the numbers. You have to care about the person. You have to be empathetic. Then the challenge for HR leaders is: are you preparing our managers in that way? Are we giving them the tools and resources so that they can care much more holistically about their employees?

Finally, data and analytics are table stakes at this point. So what is the future of AI? How do you leverage this new form of technology — not to rid ourselves of jobs, but allow us to have greater impact in our roles? How do you leverage AI to be informative and thoughtful?

Bryant: Another big issue is the ongoing tug-of-war between employers and employees over expectations. How do you think about that?

Roach: The way we think about it is using feedback loops to try to get the most information we can from our teammates and our employees about what they're looking for, and being very transparent and honest and authentic in our responses. There are some things where we can give a little bit, and there are some things where we're going to hold the line on what we expect, whether that's performance or attendance or quality of work.

Without those feedback loops, you are making assumptions about what people may want. You're not really talking to your employees, or you're reading too much on the Internet about what one company is doing or what one person wants. The key is to know your culture, know your values, and know what your employees are looking for. Then how do you tweak some things at the margins to customize approaches for some people?

Reimer: Is there a leadership balancing act or tension that feels particularly relevant right now?

Roach: Let's use empathy and accountability as an example.

We are starting to push the point that you have to hold people accountable to deliver the quality service that we're looking for, but you can be empathetic in the way that you hold those discussions. Long gone are the days of yelling and being demeaning to hold people accountable. It's about holding people accountable while doing that in a respectful way. One doesn't have to replace the other. You can do both.

Bryant: When you do informal mentoring of senior executives, what themes come up most often?

Roach: One of them is self-awareness, and how the lack thereof can be detrimental to somebody's effectiveness as a leader. So I try to help people be more self-aware about how they're coming across in a meeting, or how their tone is being perceived.

I've also coached leaders in terms of how they view others, and that styles are not always the same. Just because somebody is more introverted or maybe isn't as loud in a meeting doesn't mean that they're not effective.

Reimer: What is it about your background that prepared you to be able to navigate this environment of endless new challenges?

Roach: My inspiration for this work comes from my dad. He was a head of HR, and he often shared stories about the people side of the business over family dinners. I'm also the oldest of four. I have three brothers, so there's a competitive edge in me and wanting to continue to drive and take on that next challenge.

You also have to be humble and learn that you can't know everything right now. And that's okay because I'm really trying to build a strong team around me. I'm not the smartest person in the room, and I can rely on a lot of people to help me solve problems.

Bryant: What was an important leadership lesson for you early on?

Roach: I remember a conversation with a former manager, who I respected a ton, when he impressed upon me the idea that when he goes into a talent review, he doesn't want to have to advocate for me or try to sell me. He wanted

everybody in the room to try to pull me away from his team — “Hey, I need Carolyn for this project.”

The lesson for me was that you don’t need to promote yourself too much, but that you do need to make sure that your work is well known across the function, across the team. It’s not just enough to sit at your desk and deliver quality work to a manager. Are you involved in other cross-functional projects? Are you jumping in to help in other parts of the company? Do other people know you?

That was a defining moment for me when I thought about my own leadership. I want to build a strong HR team with people who are recruited into other roles, like finance or operations.

Reimer: Was there a leadership lesson that you took away from a bad manager?

Roach: I remember this so well. I thought I had a wonderful relationship with one of my managers. When I chose to leave the organization to pursue another opportunity, I was basically dead to that person. I was off the Christmas card list. There was no response to my goodbye email. I had invested five years into building that relationship, and I was a high performer. It was a terrible feeling and I just thought I’m never going to do that to somebody else.

So now, whenever somebody leaves, I always host a good-bye for them. I am very thankful and appreciative of the work that they contributed, and I offer to stay in touch. You can still honor a person when they leave. All of us will leave organizations at some point, and you can be very thankful and appreciative of the work they’ve done while they were there, and you can wish them well. If they leave and they felt great about me or XPO or the work that they did here, they’re attracting more talent to come work for me at some point, which is fabulous.

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