



To Succeed Long-Term, Leaders Need To Be Self-Aware And Open To Adjusting Their Approach

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Jane Elliott, CHRO at NCR Voyix, shares her key lessons and strategies for how to develop leadership self-awareness and succeed in high-level HR roles in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What are some significant HR issues on the horizon that are at the top of your mind?

Elliott: One is that the talent market around the world is shrinking. Many studies show we will have a massive talent shortage in the future. Yes, AI and technology will play significant roles in how we work, but that won't necessarily change the number of workers we need. We always hear about the importance of having the right talent in the right jobs, but we also have to ensure we have enough people to do the work that needs to get done, particularly at that higher level.

I also worry about many of the new graduates who are entering the workforce. They're smart, but many need to become better communicators. We need to help them build the skill of distilling very complicated thoughts into digestible ideas. How do you harness their drive and intelligence to optimize the contributions of those employees? It's about matching their soft and hard skills to the company's strategy. If we get all that aligned, it creates a flywheel effect.

Bryant: Sticking with that theme, if you were speaking to an audience of recent college grads, what

would you say about how to get ahead?

Elliott: Pay attention and always be willing to ask questions. You get ahead by learning how things work and not just doing the job you were hired to do. The better you understand how processes work within the company, the better you'll be able to contribute and add value.

The other thing is to put yourself out there and not just stay within the team you were hired into. Be willing to introduce yourself at all levels. Don't be afraid to reach out. I told our last class of interns—115 of them—that I was accessible and would make time to meet with them. Only five reached out. To get ahead, you can't be intimidated by an office, a title, or an individual. It's about believing in your capabilities and what you can bring.

Reimer: What are some early influences that shaped your leadership style?

Elliott: I grew up in a small town in western New York and was one of 39 kids who graduated from high school. We went to school together from kindergarten through 12th grade. It was the typical little town where everybody knew everybody. That upbringing helped my career because I treat the people I work with as part of the same community. That's important to me.

Bryant: When you coach and mentor senior executives, what themes come up most often when you share advice?

Elliott: They often have a blind spot when it comes to people, especially those not in their inner circle. So they can fail to pick up on social cues and have trouble reading the room. That's very common, and it can be very detrimental. Most people are open to feedback when you explain how someone with a different point of view might view their actions. The executives who have some self-awareness and openness to adjusting their approach are the ones who succeed over the long term.

Reimer: An important part of your job is interacting with board directors. What advice would you have for someone who is stepping into their first CHRO role?

Elliott: Hopefully, that person has had the opportunity to attend some board meetings ahead of time to listen to the discussions and develop a feel for the dynamics. They will also want one-on-one meetings with the CEO, CFO, and general counsel to get their guidance. They should also ask the CEO if they can speak directly to the lead director or board chair and the chair of the comp committee.

They don't need a big agenda. It should be a chance to ask about the directors' biggest concerns around talent, succession, and compensation issues. Those interviews can be really helpful. At the risk of stating the obvious, they should do their research to understand everyone's background. Do your homework so you can converse with the directors outside the scheduled meetings.

Bryant: What's the best leadership lesson you've learned from one of the worst managers you've had in your career?

Elliott: I did have a difficult manager for a handful of years in one of my roles. This individual didn't understand how to communicate and deal with people. If I had known what I know now, I would have said this person was a true introvert. But when you're young, you're not as attuned to such things. This manager wouldn't talk to you individually. He would only send emails. There was very little direction, and when I did ask a question to clarify something, he would get his back up.

I can see the movie pretty fast, so if you tell me that you need me to do something, I'm already thinking four steps ahead and trying to figure out the problems. When I did that with him, he viewed that as an affront to his capability or intelligence. I was being very direct, largely because of my upbringing and what-you-see-is-what-you-get approach. It was a challenge.

But that helped me better understand what can be a blind spot for me. I always need to make sure that I help bring people along who maybe can't see the end of the movie as quickly as I can. As a manager now, I ensure that everybody understands why we need to do XYZ because somebody might tell me why that's a bad idea or point out why it might not work. And I'm okay with that. I tell my group, "I'm paying you guys a lot of money so that you can tell me when my idea is a dumb idea and that you have a better idea."