



“I’m Seeing A Greater Shift to Accountability Around The Core Tenets of Good Leadership”

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Rafe Harwood, senior vice president, global human resources business partners, at The New York Times, shares timely insights with The ExCo Group’s CEO, David Reimer, and Senior Managing Director and Partner, Adam Bryant on Leadership Accountability and HR Best Practices.

Reimer: What’s your take on how the conversation around developing talent has evolved in recent years?

Harwood: I’m seeing a greater shift to accountability around the core tenets of good leadership. Rather than chasing a fad, there’s a sharper focus on holding leadership teams accountable for leading and holding managers accountable for managing with integrity, clarity of communication, diversity, and inclusive behaviors. The “how” is as important as what people achieve.

Bryant: Can you expand on your point about accountability?

Harwood: When you have certain standards and values as a company, you should expect people to abide by them. And when people act out of line with those values, you need to take appropriate action based on the situation. I’ve seen some organizations that are more willing to tolerate bad behavior from revenue-generating leaders.

But progressive organizations know that taking swift, fair, principled action is a longer-term investment in the financial and cultural wellbeing of an organization. The absence of action is a decision. It's a strategic one that can have devastating downstream impacts on the culture, on the performance of a team, the employer value proposition, and the external brand.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

Harwood: I took a lot of inspiration from my grandparents, and much of my inner drive comes from them. My grandfather was a CFO of public companies. My grandmother was a professor of calculus at Hunter College in New York, and she was just one of handful of female professors. They both had a real drive for academic success, professional success, and spiritual success. And that was really instilled in me from a very young age.

Bryant: When you coach senior executives, what are the common themes that come up in terms of the advice you share?

Harwood: Stress and anxiety get in people's way a lot. And assuming a certain reality can warp someone's view on the world. I also see a lot of reluctance to have difficult conversations, which is often the source of a lot of strife in the work environment. They need to embrace rigorous candor and be timely in providing feedback.

Reimer: Can you unpack your point about assuming reality?

Harwood: This ties into stress as well, because if you're stressed, then the lens on reality gets a bit warped. If you experienced trauma in your childhood or earlier in your career, you may have predispositions in terms of how you view people's intent. That can then impact your decision-making and lead to negativity in terms of your behavior.

A lot of people are insecure, and those insecurities can then feed into how they behave and lead to some destructive non-collaborative behaviors. But if you're more secure in yourself and your situation, you then have less to prove, and you're more likely to be collaborative and giving with your peers and the people you manage.

Bryant: Are there any tools and practices in the HR field that need to be rethought or discarded, given the relentless complexity and disruption of the world today?

Harwood: Any of the HR fads should be treated with some kind of skepticism. We're better off getting back to basics and thinking about core needs. There are many tools in the HR toolbox, like the nine box, that we can apply to a particular situation. But we need to apply them in a way that is practical, pragmatic, real world, and relevant to the situation. HR fads can be dangerous because they can actually work against what you're trying to achieve.

There are so many consultants, advisors, books, speeches, and seminars that are designed to generate a lot of money. The sole motivation of those cottage industries is to keep themselves in business for as long as possible. The foundation of my whole career in HR has been finding pragmatic, business-oriented tools and solutions and then leveraging the best parts of those best practices in a very real-world way.

Reimer: How do you hire?

Harwood: One of the core things I want to understand from candidates at any level is their values are and what drives them, and whether those drivers and values align with the organization's values and my own values as their line manager.

Those often go back to your childhood experiences and how you developed and defined those deep intrinsic things that are your ultimate North Star and that guide you in all situations. But some people don't even know what their values are. That's why a coach can be helpful—to help people dig deep and actually figure out what's important to them.