



HR Has To Bring Out The Best From Our High Performers To Help Build A Competitive Edge

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Jennifer Manchester, CHRO of Fiserv, shares her leadership insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer in this Strategic CHRO conversation. Manchester discusses transitioning from law to HR and establishing credibility, developing high performers while driving organizational transformation, and leading with gratitude and a glass-half-full mindset.

Reimer: You spent most of your career as a lawyer before moving into HR. What surprised you, even in a subtle way, about the shift?

Manchester: When you have a law degree, you have a natural level of credibility, because not everybody is a lawyer. When you're in HR, people often think that they know better than you do. But HR is a discipline grounded in science, and there's real data behind it. So I had to learn to be deliberate to establish my credibility, bring my stakeholders along, and help people understand my position.

Bryant: There's so much ambiguity right now. How do you apply your lawyer's lens to the challenges you have to navigate?

Manchester: As a lawyer, you are trained in complex, analytical thinking and reasoning skills. When we are dealing with complex issues and have to make a decision one way or the other, I do look

at the data. I want to understand the facts—not opinions. We look at the upside and downside of different decisions and play that out over the short- and long-term.

Reimer: So much legal work is based on precedent. But the challenges of today often require us to challenge our old assumptions.

Manchester: It is very easy to say, what is the precedent? What are other companies doing? Because there's safety in understanding the benchmarks and who's the leader in this space. That can be valuable, but you really have to look at your own company and understand what is going to make it successful. So, we start with, what is our business strategy? Where are the gaps? What's going to make us be successful with our clients?

Every organization is talking about transformation right now, and AI is driving so much of that. You cannot sit still in this market, given all the technological changes. There is zero room for anyone to be complacent right now. So how do you get out of your own way? How do you really focus on driving the wholesale change that you need?

Bryant: How does that inform how you think about leadership development?

Manchester: We're very intentional about focusing on our top performers to find ways to help them excel. Sometimes there's a challenge in HR when you design programs at scale. We have 40,000 employees, and you want to drive a fair and equitable process. But at the same time, you have to find ways to differentiate and bring out the best from your high performers to give you that competitive edge.

Reimer: What are the X factors that separate the very best leaders these days?

Manchester: The strongest leaders are continuous learners who remain open to new ideas and approaches. They need to be humble and compassionate. They're comfortable acknowledging that they don't know the answer and let people on their team speak first and lead. They also need to be agile and adaptable, because the world is changing so quickly. If you're not willing to evolve, fail fast, and learn from mistakes, it is going to be difficult to succeed at the highest levels.

Bryant: What were early influences that shapes the leader you are today?

Manchester: My parents instilled a tremendous work ethic in me. They grew up in farming communities, and they both worked hard while I was growing up. My mother was a realtor. My dad was in the corporate world. They also owned real estate on the side, so I would help clean apartments with them after school or go to my mom's real estate showings on the weekends.

My dad loved to ski, so he was a ski instructor on the weekends. We didn't have a lot of money, but we were able to ski on the weekends because he got a free pass for the family. They were constantly working to create a better life for themselves and for our family.

My father was always very big on learning and wanted me and my brother, and sister to get as much education as we could. He would say, "Jennifer, no one can ever take your education away from you. Your degrees, what you learn, the books you read—that's yours."

He had this incredibly positive attitude, and I was raised very much as a glass-half-full person. I'm not delusional. But I try to go through life finding positive intent in everyone and everything that I do, and that really makes a difference.

Reimer: That's a natural segue to this next question, which is, what is the most impactful leadership lesson you took away from your worst manager?

Manchester: At one point in my legal career, I was leading corporate transactions. Our children were young, and I spent every week, including weekends, in Chicago in December, working around the clock on a transaction. I was the lead M&A attorney, and I got the deal done.

After we signed the deal and I was back at the corporate office, my manager at the time made a comment about the way my office looked and said it could impact me. There was no acknowledgment of the personal sacrifice or the fact that I had just delivered something in the legal department that nobody else could have done. That moment stayed with me.

His lack of gratitude inspired me to always be thankful and show appreciation for my team, because they give up a lot for me and for the company every day. You will always learn something from a bad leader, and they often teach you more about how you should lead than positive experiences do.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Manchester: The hardest part about leadership is you can't have a bad day. You just have to rally for your people. You have to be the constant North Star, and you have to give them hope, especially when your company is going through a rough time. That's the most important thing.