



Given All The Current Challenges We Face, Leaders Must Learn To Manage Their Energy

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Holly Kortright, CHRO of Navy Federal Credit Union, joins Adam Bryant and David Reimer for a conversation exploring how organizations can build future-ready workforces in an AI world, the evolving nature of leadership through influence and coaching, and the critical importance of managing energy and resilience at the senior level.

Reimer: What issues are top of mind for you these days?

Kortright: The first is, how are we building future-ready organizations in an AI world? That includes ensuring that our team members can embrace the idea of learning and trying out new things at scale. How do we ensure that we're upskilling and reskilling and creating the space and bandwidth for learning, testing, failing, and trying out new approaches with appropriate guardrails?

There are also big challenges around how you redesign jobs at scale. How do you help every leader and every team member redesign their jobs and take advantage of what we are learning to match their skills with the work that needs to be done? And if we can cut out some of the mundane work, how do we help everybody leverage the additional time for growth, for learning, for trying out new things?

AI also presents a broader societal challenge. How do we enable learning and growth if entry-level roles go away? How do we build people's human capabilities around critical thinking, problem solving,

context-setting, and judgment so that they can determine whether AI is delivering something that is real, accurate, and useful? How are we going to build talent pipelines over time if certain pockets of jobs go away?

Bryant: And what are your thoughts on that specific point you raise about the implications of eliminating many entry-level jobs?

Kortright: Organizations are not totally going to get rid of entry level roles. In our organization, we might not hire as many entry-level workers, but we're still going to be hiring at that level. And, in many cases, those entry-level workers know how to use technology better than the people who are in organizations today.

I also think it's going to require more team-based learning at all levels. Teams are going to be made up of cross-functional members to solve problems at scale, and they're going to be made up of people at different levels in the organization.

So how do you create the trust and psychological safety in an environment where you have people at all different levels who are learning together and bringing different capabilities to bear? And the learning is going to be bi-directional. The more junior talent will be able to share technical skills, and the more senior leaders will be able to share skills around critical thinking, problem-solving, judgment, context-setting, and scenario-planning.

Reimer: And on your first point about creating future-ready organizations, how do you have that conversation in the most productive way?

Kortright: It is challenging because it's a little esoteric. As one example, what if down the road jobs are no longer a construct that we use in an organization? What if they are about matching skills to gigs, projects, experiences, and opportunities? That is challenging to think about, given how much work has been structured around jobs and job architectures and strategic workforce planning.

We're going to have to try some new things. We are looking at disaggregating jobs into tasks. How do you leverage tools to look at jobs at the task level? That helps you figure out what's going away and what will remain, which opens up possibilities around what people can do differently to innovate.

Bryant: Given what you just described, what are the implications for the X-factors that leaders will need in the future?

Kortright: Leadership will happen more through influence and coaching. It will be about removing barriers and creating that environment where people can thrive, partner together, look at challenges and novel ways to leverage technology to deliver future innovations.

We will have more mission-based teams that come together with a focused purpose for a set time. They will test and learn and look at things in agile ways. Leaders will have to provide feedback and coaching along the way to help with context setting and the bigger picture.

And then you are removing the barriers that enable them to take these new ideas to market and test and learn. Leaders will have to know how to get the most out of talent and to help people understand how to redesign jobs and processes on the fly, based on what they're learning every day.

Reimer: Given all your responsibilities, your role at times must feel overwhelming. How do you do your job?

Kortright: I love this job because there is so much variety in what I do. And my role is to enable a team and a workforce that is delivering financial services to the military and their families at a really challenging time in the world.

You also have to compartmentalize your time, including making space with your team to wrestle with big-picture issues like AI. And a big part of my job is coaching senior leaders on leadership, org design, the future of work and how we're going to attack it. Those conversations have to happen over time, and they take a lot of bandwidth, but they're critically important.

A lot of it comes down to managing your energy, which is probably one of the top things I coach senior leaders on. You need to have the capacity and resiliency and grit and perseverance to be able to deal with spinning multiple plates.

And I spend a lot of time coaching leaders on where their impact is going to be most beneficial. How do they leverage their leadership team? How do they want people to feel when you walk out of a meeting? Are you intentional about your goals walking into that meeting? What did you learn?

Bryant: What were early influences that shaped your leadership style?

Kortright: I was a nerdy kid growing up in Pennsylvania who was really great at school and not so awesome at sports. But I was determined to play a sport and get involved in something that would help me have fun and make friends. So I tried many sports that I wasn't good at, including archery, baton, and cheerleading.

Finally, my father said, "Holly, I'm going to coach softball, and you're going to be on the team." So I learned how to play softball. I was not amazing. And then there was a year when we didn't have a pitcher. So guess what? The coach's daughter became the pitcher, and I worked really hard at being a pitcher, and we had a phenomenal year.

I had other experiences that reinforced the work ethic I learned from my parents. Never give up, never quit, and you will eventually see the outcomes you're looking for.

Reimer: What is your advice to high school seniors who are trying to figure out what a career track looks like?

Kortright: First of all, you're going to change jobs so many times. We can't even imagine how much that's going to happen in somebody's lifetime. So people have to approach it from the standpoint of having the desire to learn and grow, to try new things, and to build expertise in a couple different areas that could be interrelated, along with understanding how to leverage AI. So you find the next thing, and then you find the next thing after that. That's what careers are going to be like going forward.

It's not just about sitting down with a college counselor to discuss your major and how many AP courses you're going to take. You have to build skills and capabilities and learn how to think and be open to the possibilities of trying very different things that somehow get connected down the road.