



Tracy Layney



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

'You Need To Have A Point Of View. You Need To Know What Great Looks Like.'

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Managing Director at The ExCo Group (formerly Merryck & Co. Americas)

Tracy Layney, chief human resources officer at Levi Strauss

*& Co., shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**, in the latest installment of our **Strategic CHRO interview series**.*

Reimer: What were the skills and capabilities that really set apart your top leaders during the crises of this past year?

Layne: Empathy and managers really understanding what's happening with their teams. We spent a lot of time coaching our leaders on how to understand what their people needed, because those needs could be wildly different because of personal circumstances.

For a long time, the thinking at many companies was that management styles should be pretty consistent around setting objectives and holding people accountable and providing support. But this has been a really different time because people were dealing with kids taking classes over Zoom, helping an elderly parent, or feeling stress from isolation.

So we spent a lot of time on retraining managers to lead with empathy, to understand what was happening for every single one of their employees, and to not be afraid to adjust priorities accordingly. It's a much more advanced leadership skill set.

I often think about the silver linings from the crisis and what we carry forward, particularly from a leadership perspective. At the corporate level, how do your values guide you? And then at the individual level, how do managers show up with understanding and empathy and clarity – clarity of priorities and clarity of accountability.

Bryant: So how do you assess that mix of qualities?

Layne: When I interview someone, a question I always ask is, what are you most proud of? If somebody doesn't light up when they give me their answer, that tells me a lot.

And I actually don't usually care about the content of the answer. I care more about how they talk about what they did. And so now that question will shift to asking them how they handled what happened in 2020 — what did you do, and what are you most proud of from that time?

Reimer: How did you get into HR in the first place?

Layne: I started as an organization strategist. I was seriously considering attending law school out of undergrad. But I worked at a law firm, hated it, and then got a job at this boutique consulting firm working on organization strategy, which then brought me to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) in the late 90s.

And the reason I say that is because organization strategy and organization development is still how I approach all aspects of HR. I start with the business strategy and then focus on the people strategy, and the culture to support the strategy.

Bryant: At what point did you switch from org strategy to HR?

Layne: I worked as a consultant with many HR teams. I remember

hearing people say, “Talent is the most important part of any organization,” which made total sense to me. But so many organizations didn’t act like they believed it, even though they said it. I just didn’t understand the disconnect.

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my mouth is.*

And that was really the moment when I thought about transitioning into HR. I thought that if I really believe that talent is the most important part of any organization and that companies should behave this way, I better put my money where my mouth is and go do it.

It’s only become more important in the past year. It wasn’t just about getting through the crisis, but also about who is going to emerge stronger? Was it because of the talent practices they put in place? Is it how they shifted and adapted their leadership styles? And how is all of that going to play out as we go forward?

Reimer: If you were on the board of a company and were asked to interview CHRO candidates, what would you ask them?

Layne: Assuming they have all the technical knowledge, one of the things that is particularly important in this role is your ability to listen and understand the needs of your organization and its employees. Because you’re the person who has to wake up every day thinking about the talent in the organization and how to make sure that

employees' needs are being met with the business needs.

Second, do you have a point of view? I've seen a lot of folks in HR who are so good at listening and coaching, and that's great, but you need to have a point of view. You need to know what great looks like. You need to understand how to write a talent strategy that delivers your business strategy.

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So I would look for somebody who has both the ability to listen and lead with humility, along with knowing what great looks and what needs to happen. Having a strong voice with the CEO, the leadership team, and the board of directors is also really important.

Bryant: What is the hardest part of leadership?

Layne: These roles can be very lonely. People look to you for answers, and as the CHRO, you're supporting your peers, the board, and the CEO. That's why it's important to have an excellent network of other CHROs who can empathize and guide and help support you.

The crisis taught us that you can't have all the answers, because they were far from clear and they changed from day to day. So the crucial skill became being able to manage in a high degree of uncertainty.

Reimer: What were important influences for you early on that prepared you for this kind of role today?

Layne: I grew up in Houston, Texas, in a very working-class family. I had a paying job from the time I was 14 because that's what was required in my family. I was also a very serious ballet dancer, so I developed from an early age a personality that lends itself to hard-charging discipline. But then I decided not to pursue dance as a career, in part because I needed to get as much of a full ride as I could to go to college.

So a little bit of the resourcefulness, scrappiness, and willingness to dive into hard problems is certainly in my DNA. I thought I was going to be an attorney because I was drawn to the idea of advocacy. And I feel like that's a big part of my role now.

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