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**X-Factor Leadership**

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# Talent Is More Holistic. It's About Engagement and Work-Life Integration.

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**David Reimer**

CEO - The ExCo Group

*For our interview series with top leaders in the talent*

*and learning field, we spoke with **Michelle Nasir**, Chief Talent Officer at Arsenal Capital Partners, who shared smart insights with me and my colleague **Adam Bryant**, managing director at **The ExCo Group**.*

**Reimer: How did you get into the talent field in the first place?**

Nasir: I started my career in software engineering, because I was drawn to problem-solving and innovation. Like many young business students, I thought I'd be running a P&L at some point, and maybe even be a CEO.

But when I started moving in that direction, I had one of the least enjoyable jobs I've ever had. Part of what made it so difficult was the lack of connection between the strategy and the people. It opened my eyes that I had been extremely fortunate working in companies before where people and strategy meshed together.

I really came to understand the importance of talent and execution, which is buoyed by the goodwill, trust and engagement of the people who work there. Being a huge extrovert, it was just a natural fit to start to think about people and talent roles.

**Bryant: How do you think the profession has evolved over time?**

Nasir: Early on, it was really about talent systems and processes, with a more transactional approach around roles and responsibilities — get someone in the door, manage their performance and optimize their

impact for the company. It was very much like seeing talent as part of the factory, if you will, to optimize the company's goals.

It's now matured to focus on engagement. How do I connect to the sense of purpose, the beliefs, the values that my employees have in an authentic way, so that they're bringing more to this organization than just what's required in their role specs? We want people to bring their energy and new ideas. So talent is more holistic, it's more human. It's not about work-life balance, but about work-life integration.

**Reimer: You mentioned your engineering background, but you are also dealing now with the infinite complexities of human beings.**

**How do you balance those?**

Nasir: I seek to "connect" my left and right brain – data and feelings. Your talent strategy won't work if people don't feel connected to the team and the organization.

I also don't think of people as an equation. People are a multitude of emotions and ideas. It's about trying to optimize a particular moment, helping someone to grow, and that's the coaching side of me. How do I help someone have an "aha" moment that makes them stronger? How do I help if there's a conflict? How do I help someone see what's really happening as opposed to what they think is happening?

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them stronger?*

You’ve also got to be patient and realize that things happen in increments, not overnight, particularly when it comes to teams and organizations.

**Bryant: What are the lessons learned from the pandemic at Arsenal that you hope to carry forward?**

Nasir: The organizational culture you have is the culture you keep. So if you had a broken culture going into pandemic, it was going to be even harder to connect with people and get work done. With a connected culture, we saw that it really gave our leaders permission to experiment — the foundation of trust and collaboration was already there.

In the pandemic, there was no playbook anymore, and everyone had to shift how they worked together and how they approached their jobs. So one silver lining has been that this time enabled some real leadership growth.

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perspective.*

Our change agility has really been optimized. Can you acquire a company without going to see them? Yes, you can. Can you have working dinners to get to know people over Zoom? Yes, you can. Do you drive to meet people in parking lots or in their driveway while keeping your distance and wearing protective gear? Yes, you do. If you're willing to try some experiments, the rewards are outstanding and worth it.

Interviewing job candidates over Zoom have also removed a lot of distractions — like focusing on what the person might be wearing, for example — so you can really focus on their competencies and skills. The pandemic has helped provide some real clarity of perspective and information.

**Reimer: Just to build on that last point, what are the key X-factors that you're looking for in leaders right now?**

Nasir: Intellectual curiosity is number one — that desire to want to know more, to poke around in blind spots and new areas, to make connections between different challenges and opportunities to cross-pollinate ideas.

The second is resilience and perseverance, which is your ability to thrive in a variety of circumstances. Over my business career, I've seen recessions, rebounds, technology bubbles and other bubbles, and fundamental changes in the global economy. As the cycles get shorter and shorter, that ability to thrive in uncertainty is paramount.

**Bryant: How do you test for perseverance and resiliency in a job interview?**

Nasir: All human beings have faced something challenging in their life, a difficulty that has impacted them in some way. So you want to ask people in interviews to walk you through some of those times, including the experiences that helped make them the leader they are today.

How have they taken those moments to grow, to learn, to change? Their answers will help give you a good sense of their ability to thrive in uncertainty and to persevere.

**Reimer: And can we ask that question of you? What was your challenging moment in your life?**

Nasir: It was when my dad passed away just after I graduated college. Our family is kind of traditional, and though my mom had a career, my father was the face of the Nasir family to the outside world. So when he passed away, everyone in our family was thrust into new roles. That was different for me, but it helped me build resilience and confidence and empathy.

**Bryant: And what about earlier in your life — what were key early influences for you that made you who you are today?**

Nasir: I had very loving parents who believed in me and gave me the gifts of care, education, and support. My mom was a very traditional

Indian mom, so she thought I should be a doctor. And Dad would say, “Let her be what she wants to be. She can be anything.”

So I never believed at any moment there was nothing I could not do, and that’s because of them. I always believed it was up to me to figure it out and be happy and satisfied. I was very lucky. Not everyone has that.

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