



Beth Simonetti, CHRO of TD SYNEX



Strategic CHRO

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You Can Develop The Resiliency Muscle By Thinking Through All The What-Ifs

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Beth Simonetti, CHRO of TD SYNEX, shared her key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, in our latest Strategic CHRO interview.

Reimer: If you were on a cross-country flight, and the person sitting next to you was stepping into their first CHRO role, what advice would you give them?

Simonetti: First, surround yourself with really strong talent. When you are the CHRO, there are so many functions under you, and there's no way that you can be an expert at all those things. So make sure you have a really strong team of people who both complement you and could take over from you someday.

Second, lead with trust in all your relationships, rather than starting off by thinking that somebody has to earn your trust. I find that if you lead with trust, you get it back, and it's a much quicker process than trying to make people prove themselves and earn your trust. So lead with trust, with your peers, your CEO, and your team.

Bryant: What leadership lessons did you learn from the pandemic?

Simonetti: Resiliency is a muscle that you can develop. It's about thinking through the what-ifs and how you would respond so that you are ready. So then when chaos or a crisis hits, you're in ready mode. You don't have to start in get-ready mode.

It's about constantly reprioritizing, or you might even call it triaging, and then moving on. But that reprioritization has to happen all the time, and it means you can't be too wedded to the number one priority because it might change tomorrow.

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It also means trying to eliminate as much decision-making as possible, and that means that you've automated things, you've put processes in place to make decisions easy, and you've delegated and empowered your team. Do whatever you can to make your decision-making easier by planning and being ready for whatever's going to happen the next day.

Reimer: Have you always been comfortable in environments with a lot of uncertainty and ambiguity?

Simonetti: I was born without a worry gene. I don't worry about anything that I can't control, and I try to instill that in others, too. It's a waste of your emotional energy to worry about things that are outside of your control, and if you don't worry about those things, then you can focus on the other things.

I don't get stressed out about much. My mother was not a worrier, and if you said you had a problem, she would say, "Well, fix it. Don't come to me with that. Figure out the answer." That was her approach to

everything. And that's how I treat my team too. If we make a mistake, we'll fix it, we'll move forward.

I do err on the side of being cool, calm, and collected and less passionate. That can be interpreted as maybe being less empathetic at times. My incredibly pragmatic approach to things means I am less emotional. That's not always the right balance, but in times of crisis, it tends to work well.

Bryant: What are the X-factors that you're looking for in senior talent these days?

Simonetti: The first X-factor is having a servant leadership mindset. What that really means is putting your team first and making your team successful, rather than them existing to make you successful. It means putting your ego in the back seat.

The other one is this notion of resiliency. How have they managed through difficult times? How have they managed through change? How have they managed chaos? Are they the one who can calm the room down and get people focused in the same direction, or are they spinning stuff up?

Reimer: What's your advice to new CHROs on how to work with the board of directors?

Simonetti: First of all, the board is not managing the business, so there is a fine line for the right level of detailed data that you should give a

board. Also, never show the board a problem without already having the solution or next steps. So give them the data, and then say, “Here’s what we are doing.”

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It’s also about understanding their underlying interest so that you can address it. They may be really interested in the organizational health of the culture, but what is the objective? What are they doing with that information? You have to think about their objective so that you can frame how best to present the information to them.

Bryant: Let’s shift the conversation back to you personally. What were key early influences for you?

Simonetti: I was the only girl and the youngest in my family. I grew up in Ohio, in a very middle-income family. My dad was in marketing and my mom was a nurse. She didn’t cut anybody any slack, and in her mind, a busy kid was a good kid.

And if you got a B, she would ask, Why didn’t you get an A? She set high standards and held high expectations. My dad was in the background saying the B on the report card was fine. But we were all pushed to be hard workers.

I'm very outgoing, but I am an introvert. So I recharge by being alone, and as busy and as active as I was as a kid, I also did a lot of reading and I didn't ever mind being by myself. My two older brothers weren't the kind of brothers who were protective of me. They liked to tease me. And I probably pushed the limits on things. I was able to go on some trips when I was younger and my brothers would complain that they didn't get to do that. And I would say to them, "Well, you didn't ask. I asked."

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