



Organizations Need To Change The Framework Of How They Want To Attract and Retain Talent

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John Ferguson, Chief Human Resources Officer at NASCAR, highlights the power of observation in leadership in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: What issues are at the top of your mind as you look over the horizon?

Ferguson: One is the shifting generational mix in the workforce today. We have millennials, Gen X, and baby boomers, and now, with Gen Z coming into the workplace, we have to change our perspective on what tenure means. We often talk in HR about wanting people to stay at our companies forever. But for Gen Z, that is not how they will show up, and you started to see that with millennials.

For example, millennials are probably on the high end and may stay at a company longer than five years. But for Gen Z, they're coming in for three to five years before they move on. So, you have to look at your organization through the lens of what it means to people in this context. We want to be a great place to work, and we also want to be a great place to be from.

If you're a great place to work while you're here for several years, we've helped you add to your toolkit. You helped us increase our competitive advantage and grow our revenue. At the same time, there may come a point when people are ready to try something different and move on.

That shouldn't be seen as bad because if you are a great place to work, you should naturally be a great place to be from. That means we were able to be a springboard for your career. So, people leaving is not, by definition, a bad thing because they might also come back later and provide additional value because of what they've learned at other organizations.

Bryant: The CHRO role has become more central to organizations recently, but your challenges have grown exponentially. What about your background or wiring helps you navigate this difficult landscape?

Ferguson: I learned the power of observation from a young age. It's a lesson that my mom taught me early on. I remember one moment when I was going to a fancy dinner for the first time. All this silverware was in front of me, and I wasn't sure what to do. She said, "Whenever you're in a situation, and you're unfamiliar with the norms or traditions, sit back and observe. Look to your left, look to your right, and observe."

I've carried that with me throughout my career—the importance of sitting back and observing. There's always something to be learned when you're in a listening and open posture. It also teaches you how to read a room.

Reimer: Were you in leadership roles from a young age?

Ferguson: I was always involved in student council, starting in elementary school. Quick story: I was the homeroom representative in second grade, but I didn't get that role in third grade. It was a popularity contest, and someone else won, but I was determined to contribute somehow.

So I asked myself, what if I could represent one of the classes that didn't have a representative? And that was our differently-abled classmates. So I asked the administrators, "Could I represent them?" And they said sure. So I did that, and I would often visit their class and get their input or share updates with them. I just had a persistent desire to help others from a young age.

Bryant: What is your framework for thinking about culture, especially given the pressures on organizations worldwide today?

Ferguson: Organizations need to be mindful of their mission, their values, and what they are saying about their culture, and make sure that those words are aligned with how they're showing up day-to-day. Organizations often talk about their core principles, but the real test is whether you stay anchored to them when things get tense or drift away from them.

If we said, "This is who we are," are we always showing up as we said we would? And if we're not, I will always ask whether we should consider shifting our core principles. And that's okay because people evolve and situations change. But let's make sure that we are accurately describing who we are today. There shouldn't be any contradictions.

Reimer: When coaching and mentoring executives, what advice do you often share?

Ferguson: When I look at the opportunities for most leadership teams, it's often the ability to be more authentic and transparent. Someone shared the metaphor with me that people will often say what's on the right hand in a meeting. And then he would ask people, okay, what is the left hand saying? Those are the kinds of things that are often said after the meeting, but it could be the solution we need.

So, I try to figure out ways to tap into that “left hand” because that’s often where the root causes and solutions are. Sometimes, people don’t want to be the ones to speak up, even though everyone might have a similar gut reaction to something. So, I’ve taken the approach of trying to be strategic and managing one-on-ones with my peers to understand what’s important to them. I often give that same advice to others.

Bryant: How do you hire? What are your best job interview questions?

Ferguson: One is, tell me something about you that’s not on your resume. I also like to ask people what wakes them up in the morning. I want to understand their North Star—what motivates and excites them about the day? I want to understand the connection you have to the work after a rough 15-hour day, and it’s 2 a.m., and we’re standing at the water cooler. How do you show up at that moment before we go home?