



The Latest Challenge For HR Leaders: How To “Calm The Vibration” Inside Your Company?

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Heather Ace, CHRO of Qualcomm, shares her key leadership lessons on civil discourse in the workplace, planning for risk, and fostering resilience in times of disruption in this Strategic CHRO interview with The ExCo Group CEO David Reimer and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: CHROs have to play so many different roles in companies now. Beyond your core responsibilities, what is a top-of-mind issue for you these days?

Ace: I feel like my main role now is calming the vibration. There’s so much disruption externally, and companies are microcosms of what’s happening on a grander scale. Calming the vibration is a choice, because you can easily amplify the noise or you can try to calm things down and support people through this period.

That can mean meeting people’s basic needs, in terms of safety, benefits and helping care for their physical and mental health. It is also about setting a tone for civil discourse, with an emphasis on civil, because there’s been an erosion of civil discourse. Inside the company, you don’t want to squash opinions or dialogue, but you absolutely want to enforce civility and respect. Some of those lines get blurred these days.

There's a lot going on that people can get panicky about, and energy is almost infectious. I try to be a calm and positive presence, and to occasionally say, "Let's step away from the cliff and really think about the worst-case scenario here. What's really happening? What's the next step? What can we do?" You can bring people back down to a more rational level, so they can make better decisions rather than simply react. Because you don't make good decisions when you've been hijacked by your lizard brain.

Bryant: Is that a skill you learned or have you always been wired that way?

Ace: I would say both. It is part of my personality, and it showed up even when I was young, trying to help find common ground with friends who might be having a disagreement on the playground. And I was a lawyer before moving in HR, and my impulse was always to pick up the phone and work through the one key point of disagreement, rather than arguing back and forth through letters over a million different issues.

Reimer: Given your legal background, how do think about planning and assessing for risk in this era when the world is so unpredictable?

Ace: You can't see around all the corners now, because there are so many different variables, including the ones you can't anticipate. So the focus has to shift to watching carefully for any triggers that require you to think about something differently.

I'm a big fan of that approach, because sometimes people can get paralyzed by thinking about so many variables. Planning is a mental gym. It's good for your mind. You want to get to 65 to 70 percent clarity and then know how and when you're going to adjust and think about things differently.

My strategy has always been that you put all the cards on the table, you get all the data, then you make an informed decision. You might be right, might be wrong, but if you don't make a call, you're dead in the water. So you move and you pivot.

Bryant: You're obviously drawn to new and big challenges. Where does that come from for you?

Ace: Part of it comes from losing my father early on—he died when I was two years old. And so during my formative years, I had a single mom who was very young, and I watched her go back to school and make her own way and live a life that she had never planned. I felt from a young age that I had to be independent and always make sure that I could take care of myself and my family. That lit a fire under me.

I'm also just very motivated by new challenges. Can I do that? Let's give it a go. Part of my personality is to sometimes leap before I look. If you put yourself out there, you might fail, but I've always felt that I'll land on my feet and then do something else.

Reimer: What were other important influences that shaped your leadership style today?

Ace: I would say my leadership style is empowering, energetic, positive, with deep respect for individuals and what they bring to the table. I really value people who think differently than me.

I'll share another childhood story. Kids can tease you for anything, and I remember being teased in school for, of all things, being younger than many others. That experience of feeling like I didn't fit in stayed with me. From that moment on, I decided that I will never treat somebody that way. I will never disrespect them. I will never not include them.

And that's how I lead—bringing respect and civility to the table, seeing people clearly, and working hard to find where they can contribute, because they can. Sometimes it's not in the company, sometimes it's not in the job they have now, but that fundamental respect for people is what underlies my belief and how I act and how I lead. When you see people clearly and you really listen to what they're concerned about, then you can find common ground 99 percent of the time.

Bryant: What are the X-factor qualities you look for in new hires, and what are your favorite job interview questions?

Ace: Toward the end of the interview, I like to ask people how they manage their energy. I believe in managing your energy as opposed to managing your time. I find that's an important X-factor in terms of people's success and how far they can rise, given all the demands for our attention and on our time.

You have to know yourself, what works for you, and be able to articulate that. That gives you an insight into their level of maturity. Their answer also helps me build a path with them so that we can have a sustainable way of working together.

It's also important for me to understand their ability to adapt and be agile, given how quickly everything can change and is changing. So I ask a lot of questions about how people have navigated through transformational experiences. And I like to ask people what they look for in people when they hire, because that tells you a lot about what they value.

Reimer: How do you complete the sentence, "The hardest part of leadership is..."?

The hardest part of leadership for me is letting go. Sometimes I want to try to do everything and always manage to positive outcomes, but you have to let other people do the work and let things unfold, as well. It can be really difficult to let go.