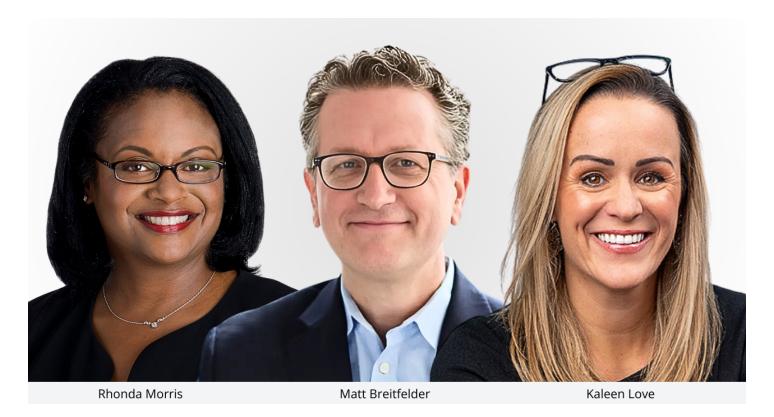Rhonda Morris · Matt Breitfelder · Kaleen Love

CHRO Roundtable: The Essential Role of Resilience for Driving Great Performance

September 8, 2025

Each quarter, we convene a discussion with three CHROs on a major theme shaping HR. Joining us for this roundtable are Kaleen Love, Chief People & Culture Officer, U.S., of Philip Morris International, Matthew Breitfelder, Global Head of Human Capital at Apollo Global Management, and Rhonda Morris, a director at Workday who recently stepped down from her role as CHRO of Chevron.

They share their timely insights on building resilience in organizations, fostering psychological safety, and navigating the impact of AI on the workforce with The ExCo Group CEO, David Reimer, and Senior Managing Director and Partner Adam Bryant.

Reimer: How do each of you think about resilience in the context of work and performance?

Breitfelder: Our most critical job as CHROs is to coach our companies—sometimes through processes, sometimes through practices, sometimes through 1:1 coaching—so that people can achieve better things tomorrow than they can today. Resilience is a critical part of the formula that's needed to achieve great, sustainable high performance.

I'm a big fan of Angela Duckworth's work on grit. If you look at any field, achieving great things requires paying a price of deliberately stretching yourself beyond what you're currently capable of. In order to achieve great things or to innovate, you're deliberately making yourself uncomfortable,

and you have to pay that price. Resilience isn't just overcoming difficult things that happen to you. Resilience is about doing what's necessary to be great, and there's no path to sustained greatness without challenge, pain, and obstacles.

Morris: I think about resilience in terms of how you handle setbacks, because everybody has them. Great athletes fail frequently. I love baseball, and there are massive amounts of failure in baseball, even for the very best players.

Think about translating that to work. What do people do when things go wrong? Let's say you have a board presentation that flops. When something like that happens, you need to question yourself. What did I do that contributed to this? What can I learn from this? What can I do differently in the future to prevent it from happening again?

Love: Baseball's not my thing, but I was a boxer. I learned a lot of personal resilience from getting punched in the face repeatedly with an audience watching. I learned about coming back from hardship—literally a hard punch.

There is a second definition of resilience that uses the word elasticity, and I do think that's an under-appreciated nuance. We often talk about resilience in terms of putting your head down and pushing through. But what's really beautiful about the elasticity of resilience is that people can soften when they're resilient, and that things like empathy can grow from pain.

When people have encountered pain, hardship, and suffering in their lives outside of their work, they usually don't think they have the answer to everything. There's something about the softer side of resilience that teaches humility. To be resilient means you have taken risks, encountered hardship, survived, and learned from it. People who've been able to do that are often kinder to others around them. So how do you create an environment at work where people can fail, learn, grow, and continue to move forward?

Breitfelder: One of my observations after all these years of working with executives who are at the top of their game is that those at the very top tier have more humility than the tier right under them. That resilience—from having strived for something and hit the inevitable potholes and obstacles—makes them much more open. They know that you have to pay the price of failure to achieve great things. That gives them more empathy when other people fail, because they understand that it's just part of the deal of being great.

Bryant: To pick up on Kaleen's point, how do you build the resilience muscle in an organization?

Love: You have to create a framework so that people can take intelligent risks, rather than playing it safe. To use another sports metaphor, there is that line from Wayne Gretzky: "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take." As an organization, you have to make sure that your people are taking some measure of risk to continue growing the business. If you stand still, you're actually going backward.

So, how, as an organization, do you encourage leaders to take the right level of risk, which by definition means there will be failures? And when those failures happen, what do you do as an organization to reward the noble failures? Do you say that we tried three pilot programs and two of them didn't work, but this is what we learned from them? It's about creating the psychological safety to say that some of the points we put on the board might be the failures that we learn from and adapt

into our next ideas.

Morris: What organizations say is important, but what's more important is what they do. Because every organization will say "fail fast." But when people fail, do they get penalized in subtle or not-so-subtle ways for the rest of their career? If that happens, then everybody will talk about that failure story for a long time—how somebody's career was derailed because they took a risk. So how companies respond is exponentially more important than the words they say. That's the proof point of whether they really mean it.

Breitfelder: My industry—the world of investing—is a team sport. And investing is a probabilistic game. That means that there are going to be debates every day because you are always searching for that alpha. That's not for everybody, because constant debate by definition requires resilience to have your ideas constantly challenged.

In a business like mine, there's definitely a level of collective resilience that builds over time, because we're taught to prize that and find gold in that on some level. I think that's true in any innovative environment. Part of the lesson of resilience is, can you alchemize the pain of that and turn it into value?

Reimer: I'm curious how the three of you think of resilience in the younger generations. Fairly or not, there are a lot of articles about them pulling back from the grind of work because they don't necessarily see the point or a return on investing that extra effort.

Breitfelder: I see two facets to that. One is that the next generation is very fired up about purpose. That's a good thing, because I think purpose and resilience go together quite beautifully. One of the ways we overcome obstacles—or crucibles, as we call them in the leadership development space—is by having a sense of purpose that really helps you power through the obstacles and not just bounce back, but bounce forward, from the hard things that happen. Having some clarity on why you do what you do and what you're chasing in your career as you practice your craft is a gift, and the next generation is very attuned to that.

There's also some truth to the idea that the next generation is approaching their jobs differently. AI is going to be an important factor in how that plays out because we're starting to see the impact of AI on traditional talent pipelines. The entry-level jobs in most industries are going to be under a lot of challenge from AI. And so, we're going to find out what those younger employees are made of as they figure out how to compete with bots.

Morris: That is a concern to me. Everybody learns lessons from horrible entry-level jobs that will help them throughout the course of their career. And if those jobs don't exist, you can't expect someone to leapfrog to becoming an exceptional leader. That's going to be a big gap.

Love: I absolutely agree with the idea of dialing up purpose. Because when the going gets tough, you want to have an answer to the question: Why am I here? Why would you keep going if you didn't have a strong sense of why you're doing what you're doing? So how do you keep dialing up that sense of purpose in the organization?

On AI, I think generations are approaching AI enablement with different levels of anxiety. So the challenge there becomes, how do we dial down some of the anxiety and the potential fear? Fear is not a good human motivator, and fear makes you paralyzed. We need to somehow find a way to tamp down the anxiety and the fear so that people can embrace the new technology, regardless of their individual comfort level.

Morris: There is a lot of anxiety from people worrying about whether they will continue to have their jobs. Is technology going to force me into unemployment? Am I going to be able to take care of my family?

And then you have this future workforce where they have no idea what they're going to do. Think about the focus on computer coding. We heard that everybody should learn how to code, and now nobody has to learn how to code. You can go down a path and spend a lot of money and time learning something that will be obsolete.

Bryant: I'd like to shift the conversation to a more personal note. Each of you wouldn't be where you are professionally if you weren't resilient yourself. Could you share a story from your earlier years that helps explain where that resilience comes from for you?

Love: I've been pretty public about this, but I'll use my coming out story, which didn't happen until my twenties. I grew up in a very religious environment, and so coming to grips with being a person who perhaps wouldn't be accepted in the community and environment I'd grown up in was frankly terrifying. I had to deal with the risk of living authentically, the risk of coming out, and what that would mean to everything and everyone I'd ever known, including my own family.

So when I took that risk, it was really, really hard for me. In my late twenties, I almost died. I came close. But I didn't die. I chose life. I chose love. And I was able to pick myself up and move on. I learned a lot about humility, and about not having all the answers. I learned a lot about empathy. I learned a lot about embracing the fact that there are things I don't know and don't understand, and I can invite others to do the same. It also helped me reset what I would stand for, and how I would show courage to protect others who might be in similar circumstances, and to speak out for what was true and what was authentic, even if it didn't fit the prevailing narrative.

Morris: I went to Catholic school from kindergarten to high school, and when I was in first grade, I loved my teacher, Mrs. Trujillo, but she did not like me at all. I don't know why. I remember a day when we were coloring, and she picked up the work done by one of my best friends, and—I remember this like it was yesterday—she said, "This is how you should color." And then she held up mine and said, "This is how you should not color."

I thought, this is terrible and wrong. I was very scarred by that. And so, I then start focusing on how to color better, staying in the lines. And one day, I was walking to school, and I picked some California poppies for her. When I gave them to her, she said, "These are the state flowers. It's illegal to pick them. Do you realize you could go to jail for picking these flowers?"

That's when I decided that she clearly didn't like me and that nothing I would do was going to change that. She didn't think I was smart, but I believed back then that I was smart. I was about 4 or 5 years old. That's when I started being very competitive academically. And I decided that at the end of 8th grade, when I would be finishing elementary school, I was going to get the general excellence award for academics during the big assembly for graduation, when all the parents are there. And guess what? That's exactly what I did.

That teacher tried to make me feel that I was not smart, but I knew she was wrong. I didn't tell her that she was wrong. I just decided that I would prove that she was wrong. She was, inadvertently, a very motivating force in my life.

There was a second important lesson when I went to high school. I was in math class being taught algebra, and it felt like I was in a Latin class. I couldn't do the work because, for whatever reason, there was a gap in what they taught us in elementary school. I sat there terrified that the teacher was going to call on me. But I went to her after class one day and said, "I need your help." She worked with me after school every day for two months just to catch up. And that's how I learned the power of asking for help.

Breitfelder: I'll also share a story from my childhood. My mother was a Swedish immigrant and a feminist activist. When I was about four years old, she started to talk to me about how she felt that the United States was a sexist country, especially compared with Sweden, and that she wanted me to be part of the solution of fostering equality and a level playing field. And again, I was about 3 or 4 years old, and I remember thinking that I don't know if I'm ready for this conversation.

She decided that she wanted to practice a craft, and that the only way for her to practice a craft was to go back to college, which meant that I was going to be in the daycare at the college. And then she went to grad school and ultimately became a therapist. My life changed in a lot of ways. I became very self-reliant at a young age. You learn to walk yourself to school. And when she was going to be late, I made dinner for myself, even if it was just putting a frozen dinner in the microwave. But I got to see my mom fall in love with her career and see it as a true calling. That was the most incredible example for me on how to think about your job as something deeply meaningful.

Like Rhonda, I also attended Catholic school. The administrators asked me to be a crossing guard—because I was so good at taking care of myself, they put me in charge of taking care of everyone else. When I went back to my grade school reunion, people were asking each other what they did for a living. When I told people I was the head of HR for a company, they said, "You're just doing the same job you did in first grade. You've always been the crossing guard, and you're still the crossing guard."