



Resilience In The Face Of Adversity Is The Ultimate Trademark Of Successful Leaders

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Kari Knight Stevens, CHRO of The Cigna Group, shared timely insights with The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant on building bottom-up support, the importance of communication for success, and resilience as the defining trait of great leaders.

Reimer: What's a top-of-mind issue for you these days?

Stevens: The biggest thing I am trying to solve is strategically evolving where and how work gets done over the next five years—the composition of the workforce, the location of that work across multiple markets, how that work gets done in terms of skills, and how we leverage the amazing potential of technology.

Bryant: How do you begin to put some structure around tackling that big challenge?

Stevens: You have to start planning on these multi-dimensional horizons and long time frames. That can be challenging, given the resource and capacity constraints within the function. You have to do assessments role by role, business by business, and function by function to get it right. And you can't make broad-brush judgments. That's what makes it so challenging.

It requires building bottom-up support for thinking about different tools and levers that can be used in the future and how that is going to impact roles across all our teams. And then, as a leadership team,

we have to drive more top-down adoption and thinking about how AI might reshape the workforce.

HR can't do this alone. My peers are collective owners of the talent strategy. HR drives that strategy through input from the business and our functional partners, but at the end of the day, we all own it, and we all have to drive it. You have to be thoughtful about how you influence and get buy-in from your peers.

Reimer: You're a lawyer by background. What skills from that training help you in this CHRO role, and what new muscles have you had to build since stepping into the job?

Stevens:My legal background helps me get to the heart of an issue, and to separate what's real as opposed to noise. I ask a lot of questions, and I listen carefully to understand people's perspectives. The ability to communicate well—being clear and concise, with the right context—is critical to being successful, especially at the executive level.

What's been quite different in this role is having to learn the skills of being an effective HR business partner. These are complex, sophisticated issues, and they're different from legal issues because they're not necessarily backed by the concreteness and clarity of the law. These are often very dynamic, nuanced, and emotional issues.

Bryant: You clearly are drawn to big challenges. Where does that drive come from?

Stevens:Throughout my career, I've never been able to stand by and look at a challenge without wanting to tackle it. I was always the person saying, "We've got to do something about this." I always tell people, "Be the one who grabs the challenge and takes a chance."

I came from a pretty modest background in rural Pennsylvania, and you just had to work hard to earn things. I also came from a community where people didn't have a lot but they were really respectful of one another. If you needed something from your neighbors, you could count on them.

People took care of one another. I try to bring that into work, too, in terms of recognizing that everybody has a story. Everybody has something going on. And everybody, from the CEO down to entry-level employees, deserves respect.

Reimer: What are the X factors that separate the best leaders these days?

Stevens:In this dynamic environment, we put a premium on learning agility—the ability to adapt to new challenges and environments—and then demonstrating curiosity and continuous improvement and being able to thrive in a lot of ambiguity and change.

The ability to influence is another big one, and that requires an ability to communicate effectively and to be a connector—somebody who has strong relationships across the organization so that they can advance work and get things done outside their particular domain.

And I always come back to resilience. That's the ultimate trademark of a successful leader—in the face of adversity, you can pick yourself up and be motivated to move forward and learn from it. People who demonstrate that tend to do well.

Bryant: What is the most common coaching advice you share with senior leaders?

Stevens: People sometimes struggle with communication—knowing and understanding their audience and being able to effectively influence them. Helping people understand the why and the impact of their work is really crucial. That's a big part of executive presence, as well—being able to pivot and adapt and communicate effectively.

Stakeholder management is another big topic. In a complex and multi-dimensional organization like ours, it's easy to miss something that might be happening in other parts of the company. You always have to make sure you have strategic alignment as you're advancing different initiatives and building support.

Reimer: What's the most impactful leadership lesson you've learned from a bad manager?

Stevens: I've worked for some leaders in the past who were always canceling meetings, and if you did meet with them, they weren't focused or invested in the work. You could tell they weren't listening or engaged. It was a one-way relationship, in that you only heard from the manager when they needed something from you, rather than being that mentor or coach.

That's why I really try, in all my interactions with my team or with anybody I'm mentoring, to make them feel that they've got my full and undivided attention. I want them to know that I am listening to them, I'm hearing them, and that I'm not successful if they're not successful.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Stevens: The hardest part of leadership is that it's never-ending. You never can fully declare success.

Reimer: What career advice do you give kids now, given all the uncertainty in the world?

Stevens: They're going to be working in ways that are hard to imagine at this point. But at the same time, there are underlying principles that aren't going to change, like treating people with respect, running toward opportunities, working hard, and following your passion.