



A Challenge for All Leaders: How Do You Create The Right Culture To Leverage AI?

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Neal Sample, Chief Digital and Technology Officer at Best Buy, joined The ExCo Group's David Reimer and Adam Bryant to share insights on the intersection of leadership and AI, noting that while AI generates more ideas than ever before, it also challenges us to be more discerning and limits our ability to build the knowledge and wisdom that come from hands-on experience over time.

Reimer: What are the right questions that organizations should be asking themselves about AI now?

Sample: People are focusing a lot right now on efficiencies and the labor advantage that AI is supposed to create. But they have not thought enough about what it means for leaders and their employees.

There are deeper questions around how leaders should lead differently. How should they be spending their time and energy? How do you create the right culture to leverage AI? And what do you do with the additional resources and productivity that should be freed up by AI?

Bryant: What are the “bad movie” and “good movie” versions of how you’re seeing AI being implemented?

Sample: The bad movie version is the classic one, where AI is simply a productivity play and a race to the bottom. It is there to make mundane jobs go away, and ultimately it is positioned as a threat to many employees and their jobs. It's presented as an inevitable outcome that derives its primary value through role elimination. That may be good if you're a CFO or a stock analyst, but it's very challenging in terms of the employee conversation.

It's difficult for companies to get started when nobody wants to play the game, because winning is losing for most of those teams—a successful AI initiative means putting you out of a job. A lot of companies are having that kind of conversation.

For the good-movie version, the message from the top needs to be: We will be able to free up capacity, but it is freeing up the mundane and automating the repeatable. It is there to help make you more efficient and to help you operate at the top of your game. If you are in a creative role, for example, this will take out some of the administrative overhead and allow you to spend more time on your core activity. The point is to position it as an enhancement and a tool.

I've been using what happened with lumberjacks as an analogy. The ones who started out with an axe either embraced or abhorred the crosscut saw. But it was much faster, which meant fewer lumberjacks were needed, and the business had better margins because of the greater productivity.

Then the chainsaw shows up, and all of a sudden you can be much more productive. And now we have these automated rigs that can take down and strip a tree in a single motion and section it up. So, we still have lumberjacks. There are fewer of them, but they are masters of an art that they couldn't have imagined. They're incredibly productive. Embracing that vision means that what you do today will change, and that you will be more productive as you get rid of more of the toil.

That is the glass-half-full version that I think will keep people from feeling threatened because the message is, "I'm going to help make you 20 percent more productive, but I expect you to take that 20 percent time and put it toward higher-value activity."

Reimer: It's a reminder that so much of leadership is about framing and building narratives for the organization.

Sample: Ultimately, I see this as leading to the industrialization of creativity at the corporate level. And that creates some challenges. With AI, we will have more ideas than we ever had before. And that places a higher premium on execution and the ability to operationalize something. It requires an ability to discern among the ideas, because having more ideas isn't better if you can't distinguish a quality idea from one that's just meh.

You have to be more of an expert in being able to winnow down a list of 50 possible courses of action. It raises the bar on your ability to be discretionary, to choose the right ideas to go after. That industrialization of creativity is a very real power. I don't think we know exactly how to harness it yet. And it will be hard to succeed if you're not already an expert, because the creativity side requires that discernment and judgment. An infinite pool of ideas might as well be noise.

Bryant: That creates a huge demand for people with that expertise.

Sample: There will be a real premium for people who have experience, including wins and setbacks, and they know good from bad. There may be fewer of those experts, because there may be fewer development opportunities. It's going to be difficult for people to build that kind of knowledge base.

It is one of those ironies, because you are enabling somebody to do a basic activity in a way that is unparalleled, and yet they may not be able to develop the knowledge and wisdom that comes from actually doing the activity over time.

Reimer: What should leaders be doing to help accelerate adoption of AI?

Sample:First and foremost, leaders need to model this behavior. They need to be curious. They need to use these tools. They need to openly admit when they use these tools, and say, "Here is something that I've put together using X, Y or Z. What do all of you think?" That will make it not only safe but it will also encourage folks on the ground to do the same.

Bryant: And what are the questions that every CEO should be able to answer about their AI strategy?

Sample:When it comes from Wall Street analysts, they're really asking the CEO if AI is giving them a source of leverage and operational effectiveness. Can you do more with the same resources, or even with less? They want to know if you can improve your bottom line without touching the top line, and whether AI will create opportunities to improve your top line. You could ask the same questions about supply-chain opportunities.

Reimer: What career advice do you offer to high school and college students these days?

Sample:We used to talk about the value of T-shaped skills that give you both depth and breadth. But now you need more pi-shaped (π) skills, like the Greek symbol. You need to have depth in your chosen profession, because you need the ability to discern the right answer within your domain.

But the other leg of the letter refers to the importance of using AI to supplement what you do. Because the people who know how to use it better than you do are going to be more successful and ultimately more effective in their roles. And it doesn't matter what the role is.

So, the best advice I would give to those students is to become great at something and also know how to use these tools to be an amazing learner, because these are expert learning systems. They are about knowledge retrieval and creativity, and there's a mutual enhancement there that's incredibly powerful. If you're good at one or the other, you can still do fine. But if you want to be distinguished, you need to do both.

Bryant: What were important early influences that really shaped who you are today?

Sample:There was an influence at home that was very creative. Both my father and my grandfather had a military background, and they were incredibly curious. They were continuously building and inventing. We had a laser lab in our basement when I was in high school. So, I had a very sort of exploratory lineage, if you will.

I also debated in high school and college. That activity forces you to think broadly and openly and differently, because in every single round, you would be presented with ideas that you never had seen before, and you would have to quickly evaluate them. To be a successful debater, you have to be able to rapidly incorporate ideas that you'd never seen before.