



As HR Professionals, We Have To Meet The Business Where It Is and Eliminate The Noise

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Allison Stirrup, Chief Human Resources Officer of Ferguson, shares her leadership insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Her key themes include the impact of AI on HR, the importance of aligning HR with business priorities, and the significance of trust and resilience in leadership.

Reimer: What issues of top of mind for you these days?

Stirrup: AI is certainly top of mind for everyone, and we haven't even begun to imagine the impact it can have on HR and the workplace.

But even more important for us right now is our focus on meeting the business where it is. As HR professionals, we sometimes have a view of how things should work or what would be a nice-to-have. Recently, we've taken a really disciplined look at the impact of what we are asking of the business.

To support this focus, a little over a year ago, our executive team spent time in locations across the country listening to our associates. We asked for candid feedback about where we can improve, where we were over-engineered and overcomplicated, and how to overcome the barriers to customer service.

The listening sessions made us all step back, recalibrate, and think about how we can eliminate the noise. In our culture, everything is centered around the customer, and one of our tenets is finding a way to yes. We discovered we were inadvertently getting in the way of our associates being able to find a way to say yes to our customers.

To remedy this, we adopted the sports concept of “no own goals”—we didn’t want to hinder our chances of winning because of policies that felt like we were scoring on our own net. As one example, HR can like the idea of managers having monthly performance discussions with every associate, but it’s simply too much for the business. So we shifted to encouraging less formal feedback and asked leaders to provide informal feedback on an ongoing basis. It’s about finding a balance between those nice-to-haves and what the business can do and wants to do.

We align our HR work to where the energy and business focus is. There is always more work than we have time for, so we’ve spent the last year figuring out how to take advantage of that energy and prioritize the work.

We are looking at everything we’re asking the field to do and questioning what is necessary. What’s the root of the work? How would this be received by the business? It’s important that your business partners have a voice at the table to help pressure-test new ideas.

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

Stirrup: Everything starts with a foundation of trust. It’s critical for building cohesion so teams can manage through the challenges we all face. Leaders also need resilience and grit, which we talk a lot about at Ferguson.

It’s not always a glamorous business. You’ve got to have grit and passion to work toward the long-term goals we’re setting, and that often requires navigating through setbacks.

I also think a lot about critical thinking and problem solving. You need thoughtful decision-making to help people focus on the right priorities.

Reimer: You’ve been at the company for 27 years now. What were some key lessons for you as you rose up through the ranks?

Stirrup: I started as a trainee working in the warehouse. My first day was two weeks after I graduated from Virginia Tech. I was wearing shorts, a t-shirt, and steel-toed boots to work in the warehouse in the Florida sun. I never even considered it a possibility that I would be sitting in this seat someday. But I had people who really looked out for my career and gave me hard feedback.

Probably the toughest feedback was when I first moved into a management position. I thought everyone was going to do things the way I did them. I struggled with emotional intelligence, and I set a really high bar.

I had a manager who sat me down and said, “You’re difficult to work for and I know you can do better.” It created a moment for me when I asked myself, was I willing to put in the work? It was a long journey, but it really helped shape who I am today.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you?

Stirrup: My dad was an entrepreneur and ran his own business. I get a lot of my ambition and drive from him, but I was also a competitive swimmer as a kid. I remember vividly so many moments of winning a race and loving that feeling. That became ingrained in me and is one of the sources of my drive and energy.

In school, I wasn't a straight A student. But the minute I got into the workplace, I was motivated to learn, to be the best at whatever role I was in at the time, and then get to that next opportunity.

That said, there were a number of times when I didn't get the role I wanted. In fact, I didn't get the role I have now when I interviewed for it the first time in 2017. My predecessor gave me some honest feedback about how I had spent much of my career focusing on talent in HR and that I needed to go to the business-partner side to broaden my experience. Seven years later, I got the CHRO job.

Reimer: Doing a job like yours is as much about managing your energy as it is about managing your time. What do you do?

Stirrup: I wake up at 5 o'clock in the morning, and I work out every single morning on my Peloton. I don't remember the last time I skipped a workout. It's so important for my well-being.

I also think commute time is underrated. People sometimes complain about it, but it's a great opportunity to think about your day on the way in and then to decompress on the way home—think about what you did well and what you could have done better.