



# A Key Skill For HR Leaders: Finding What Matters Most Amid All The Shades Of Gray

February 16, 2026

**Steven Baert, Chief People Officer of GE Vernova, shared his key leadership lessons with, David Reimer, CEO of The ExCo Group, and Adam Bryant. Key themes include the evolving nature of succession planning, the importance of curiosity and decisiveness in leadership, and the dual-customer role of HR. Baert shares his experiences and insights on navigating complexity and preparing for future challenges.**

**Reimer: You are both a CHRO and a board director, so you have those two lenses on conversations around succession. How has your thinking evolved?**

**Baert:** For a long time, succession was about filling out a form with a job title and then a list of candidates who would be ready now, ready in one to three years, and ready in five years. What has really shifted is the recognition that nobody knows what a specific job will be like in five years. People jump too quickly into discussing names and comparing one candidate to another, when we're not aligned or clear on what the job will require in the next several years.

It has to start with clarity and alignment among the leadership team and the board about what the organization is trying to achieve and then figuring out the roles and skills that will be required to drive that strategy.

**Bryant: What are the top three qualities you're looking for in leaders these days?**

**Baert:** Curiosity is the first one. Are they “learn-it-alls” or “know-it-alls”? People are trained to sound like they're curious during interviews, but you can very quickly figure out whether somebody is genuinely curious. What are they learning right now? What new skills are they developing? What has surprised them in the last 48 hours?

Second is the ability to navigate complexities. Can they train their mind not to jump straight to a conclusion? Can they live in ambiguity for a while to make sure they get the most informed perspective on a problem? If you can't live in that ambiguity, you will close doors and make a decision that is not necessarily the best one.

I also look for decisiveness. Curiosity and living in ambiguity is great, but you can't procrastinate. Decisiveness has to come with understanding risk tolerance. How do they navigate risk? How do they make decisions? Finally, they have to learn from failures. A truly self-aware leader is able to analyze their growth process through mistakes. Have they become a better version of themselves after setbacks?

I think those are universal leadership traits that will be even more important in a world of artificial intelligence, because that's where judgment, out-of-the-box thinking, and lateral learning comes in. I am a big fan of the possibilities that artificial intelligence will open up for us, but it just increases the requirements for leaders to be able to navigate new challenges, rather than relying on experience.

**Reimer: You have to deal with so much ambiguity and so many new challenges in your role. How do you do that?**

**Baert:** I often have two fundamental discussions with my team. First, I see our role as composers. We write the music for the occasion. We often don't perform the music. We often don't get credited for the music. We don't get the applause, but we when we do our jobs very well, we very much understand what is required for the company to achieve its goals, and the music that is needed to help make that happen.

But then it's our job to hand it over to others and sit back and watch the performance. You know you were responsible for the design, but you never need the attention or the credit. A lot of people come to HR because they love to help, but when you love to help, you may fall short of the objective to make yourself redundant. If you need to feel like you're indispensable, and you get adrenaline and motivation from that, then you will not be the best CHRO, in my view.

The second misunderstanding that I sometimes see in HR is a lack of clarity on who is our customer. We have two distinct customers—the business and our people. At one moment, I'll be working on a challenging individual employee issue, and the next moment, I might be deciding how we should integrate a business without losing the unique capabilities that we paid for. These are two different customers, and so if we're not clear on who our customer is, then we will often not optimally serve that customer.

**Bryant: You do have to deal with so many challenges on so many fronts. How do you handle it all?**

**Baert:** That's something I struggled with for a long time. Funny enough, the solution came from my dentist. I had a dental emergency a while back, and luckily, my dentist was able to see me right away. I was worrying about how my problem was messing up my own schedule, but then I asked my dentist, how do you handle patients who have to see you right away?

He said, "I plan for it. I know that I will always get one or two emergencies a day." So just like him, I now make time in my calendar to deal with emergencies.

**Reimer: What were early influences that prepared you to be able to thrive in this role?**

**Baert:** I was lucky that my parents treated me and my sister as grown-ups from an early age. We were given a lot of freedom. It's not that there were no rules; rather, they gave us kind of a framework on how they expected us to behave. The only disadvantage, of course, is that we couldn't really be a child, because we had to behave as a responsible, accountable person from a young age.

But that was a good background for me to build the kind of situational awareness that you need in this role. I have an ability to see through all the shades of gray and find the few things that matter. My legal background helps, as well, because you learn that there is no black and white, and that you have to think in terms of scenarios, variables, and the most relevant elements at any given time.

My approach to doing this job has evolved over the years, as well. I used to be more singularly focused on driving toward a specific outcome, but now I'm paying more attention—because of how the world has evolved and because of how rapidly things can change—to the process of just getting better every day.

I know I can no longer predict an outcome in three years, because who knows what the world will be. But if I'm committed to be a little bit better today than I was yesterday, or to make something a bit better than it was yesterday, I'm more likely to hand off the role to someone in better shape than when I inherited it. That may sound simple, but you need to overcome a lot of internal fear of failure and instead focus on continuously trying to make things better.

**Bryant: What career advice are you sharing with your own kids these days?**

**Baert:** I'll mention curiosity again, especially not taking facts at face value. Don't let yourself be boxed into a particular camp in a world that is increasingly polarizing. You have to pause and think about the critical questions. For example, whenever there is a conflict, ask yourself who is paying for it. Where are they getting their resources from? What are they trying to gain from that? And when you hear strong statements, ask yourself why equally smart people are convinced of the opposite. Be that curious person at school and at work.

I also tell them to embrace risk at their age. Don't pursue a specific title or a specific salary. Just embrace risk, because you have enough time and most of us have enough support at home to recover from the risk. It gets harder to do that when you take on a big mortgage and have a family.

Finally, I tell them to gravitate toward studies that teach you abstract thinking. Because of artificial intelligence, the work environment is going to pay less for certain kinds of expertise over time. The real value in the future is going to come through critical thinking, which you learn through abstract studies.