



# Leaders Have To Simplify Complexity For Their Teams But Also Leave Room For Autonomy

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**Alana Brandes, Chief People Officer at Guild, speaks with Adam Bryant and David Reimer about navigating leadership in an era of unprecedented complexity. Their conversation explores the critical importance of questioning assumptions to unlock team dynamics, what it truly means to become an AI-first company, and why leaders must rely on muscle memory rather than old playbooks when facing new challenges.**

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

**Brandes:** The first is just how dynamic and challenging it is to be a leader today. Part of the role that I play is helping leaders translate some of the big shifts—in our market and our business, the evolution of AI, and skills disruption—so that everyone is aligned around clear and actionable priorities amid all this ambiguity. The bar is getting higher and higher, and the path to success is getting less clear.

On AI specifically, we are going through what so many companies are going through, which is it to focus on what being an AI-first company actually means. So many companies want this to be their brand and have it be intrinsic to who they are. But we are at the tip of the iceberg in terms of inherently understanding what that could actually mean.

It's not just about process evolution or product capability. It's about completely reimagining how work gets done and expanding the aperture of what could be. There's so much power and disruption that's

possible. I have a lot of energy for helping leaders and leadership teams get real about what they can and should do in that space. It's complex.

**Bryant: Can you talk more about the responsibility that feel you as CHRO to help simplify complexity for the organization?**

**Brandes:** Being a leader at any level is hard. You have to be the emotional center for your employees. You have to drive strategy. You have to be able to operate amid all the ambiguity.

As our initiatives and priorities move through the organization, there is a requirement for that complexity to be simplified, but you also have to leave room for autonomy. We have to trust our leaders to translate and make decisions based on the information and context that we provide.

**Reimer: One of the challenges and complexities of the CHRO job is that you are part of the team, but you also have a player-coach role to ensure the team itself is operating at a high level. That's a tricky balancing act.**

**Brandes:** It's the hardest part of the job, and it's also my favorite part of the job. To be able to do that, you have to have a strong relationship with the CEO. This is a time when previous playbooks and approaches are not necessarily working or landing well.

Something I think about and talk about a lot with the team is that you should rely on your muscle memory, but maybe not your actual memory, when it comes to making decisions. Because those muscles are built through the experience of going through a challenge, whereas your memory will be about different problems and details, and those previous decisions and approaches might not serve you in the right ways today.

People can get into trouble when they start relying on old playbooks and assuming that they will work again in a different context. That can create silos and tough dynamics within a leadership team. Better to approach it by saying, yes, we all have muscles that were formed through certain experiences, but we're here to solve this problem together. That's where you can unlock some cool team dynamics.

**Bryant: And when those dynamics aren't working, what are some tactical approaches you use to get everyone back on track?**

**Brandes:** I do it by questioning some of the assumptions that are coming into the conversation. Because that, to me, is where things can go off the rails—when one person is operating with one set of assumptions, and another person is operating with a totally different set of assumptions. That's when you have to pause and go back to basics, and make sure everyone is aligned around the core assumptions that you're operating under.

**Reimer: What advice do you have for someone coming into a CHRO role for the first time?**

**Brandes:** The first is, don't come in with an agenda that you formed in earlier jobs. The second one is captured in a phrase that we say on my team, which is that we have to make sure that everything we do is for the business and not to the business. It's about seeing our role as removing friction so people can do their jobs as effectively as possible.

**Bryant: What were some early influences that shaped who you are today?**

**Brandes:** The biggest influence, and why I took this path in life and career, was my dad. He passed away when I was 24, just as I was getting started in my professional career. He spent most of his career in a lot of different facets of HR.

At one point, he started a recruiting company, and then he worked his way up the ranks at Deloitte and did HR consulting before joining Johnson & Johnson in leadership development. When I was younger, he would come home and talk about his work. I didn't totally understand it, but he was so passionate about it.

When I went to college and started getting more interested in psychology and human behavior and organizational design, we started to really connect around those topics. I often think about how fun it would be to be able to talk shop with him now.

My mom very much worked to be a provider for our family. She had a number of different careers, and it was clear that she did that to create a means for the family. That is wonderful, too.

But when I think about what's important to me in my career, it is being able to find something that brings me joy on a day-to-day basis, so that I can come home and talk to my husband and my kids about it in the same way that my dad did.