



The Strongest Leaders Today Are Brave And Bold But They Are Also Curious And Humble

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In this Strategic CHRO conversation, Adam Bryant interviews Stephanie Werner-Dietz, executive vice president, human resources of ArcelorMittal, to explore her insights on leading through a generational shift, navigating AI transformation, and fostering the humility and curiosity that define the strongest leaders.

Q. What issues are top of mind for you these days?

A. The generational shift is a big one. We have many leaders who are retiring. We are losing a lot of know-how and experience, and the next generation needs to be ready for the challenges we are all facing, including managing the different generations in the workplace now.

The second one, of course, is how we adapt to AI. Which AI solution should we jump on? There are so many out there. In the HR space alone, there are so many startups. You have to navigate your way through that and at the same time help the organization through this transition.

You need to train the workforce to have AI literacy and you need to cut out the fear factor. You constantly have to balance the needs and wants of employees with what the business needs. Sometimes the answer is that you need to communicate to each generation in slightly different ways.

It's about developing and educating leaders, and bringing different viewpoints, perspectives, and wishes to the table. It starts with understanding each other. I often say that in HR, you should never assume anything.

Q. How did that insight—never assume anything—become important to you?

A. When we roll out new HR initiatives, we believe they make sense and will be good for the business. But sometimes they are based on assumptions that were not validated. We assume something, but we don't really know. I've had many experiences when people didn't understand something that I thought was clear. Sometimes that means better listening. We can get ahead of ourselves.

In meetings, you occasionally see the phenomenon where there is a collective assumption that everybody is on board with an idea, and nobody dares to speak up and ask the obvious question because they are worried they might look stupid. Everyone is moving so fast. We have to pause and dare to ask the obvious questions. What is the essence of what we're discussing, and have we brought everyone along with us? That requires bravery.

Q. What do you consider to be the X-factors that separate the best leaders?

A. I have found throughout my career that the strongest leaders are open to being challenged. They have self-confidence and self-awareness, but they're humble and eager to learn. If you have someone who thinks they know it all and doesn't want to be challenged anymore, they will miss the point. Leaders need to be brave and bold but also curious and humble. They see feedback as a gift and not as a criticism. And if they can maintain that humility, they will be always able to adapt.

I've also seen generally that if people are good direct reports they also tend to be good leaders. They can serve well and they can lead well. Usually, it's combined. I have never seen someone who's just a good leader. They are good direct reports, as well.

Q. How do you hire? What questions do you typically ask in a job interview?

A. I tend to focus on behavioral questions because they help me understand who someone is and not just what they can do. What has shaped you? What has had an impact on you? Why are you the person you are today, compared to maybe 10 years ago? What changed—what did you learn and how did you learn it? How do you make sure you keep learning? What was the last time you learned something, and what did you learn? What was the last time you received feedback that surprised you? Can you share what it was and how you reacted to it?

Another standard question is, did you ever have a moment when you were confronted with something that did not agree with your values? What was it and how did you react to it? I also like to ask about what led them to make big changes in their life.

Q. And what about you? What were early influences that shaped who you are today?

A. I was very adventure-driven from an early age. When I was 14, I traveled to the United States for six weeks by myself, staying with very distant relatives. I had no fear. I visited Los Angeles, Washington, DC, and New York. I had a fantastic time.

And I've lived in many different countries over the years, including the Philippines, Romania, Finland, China, Switzerland, and the U.S. The common thread is just trusting life and trusting yourself. I always ask, what's the worst thing that can happen? If I can deal with the worst thing, then I can deal with everything.

Q. When you coach senior leaders, what themes come up most often?

A. We should never underestimate the impact of our words and our behavior as senior leaders. These are very high-profile roles. Sometimes leaders forget the impact they have if they are in bad mood or make an offhand remark.

Everything gets picked up, and with social media, leaders are so exposed. They have to be themselves while also managing and maneuvering through challenges. It's not easy. You have to choose your words carefully and be aware of the signals you are sending.

Q. What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

A. Staying true to yourself. You're in an ever-changing environment. You have business pressures. With all that, you need to be able to remain vulnerable. It's also very difficult to say no, especially the higher you are, or to say that you are tired and starting to feel burned out.

You have to stick to your values and make sure you don't compromise. You can't lose yourself in these jobs, because that can affect your health, and then you won't be able to contribute to your team or the organization. You need to stay true to yourself and who you are.