



HR Cannot Provide Certainty For Employees, But It Plays A Critical Role In Providing Clarity

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Ana White, Chief People & AI Enablement Officer at Lumen, shared sharp insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include reframing AI adoption as a people-and-culture challenge, the CHRO's role in providing clarity amid uncertainty, and building succession and board conversations around transformation.

Reimer: In addition to Chief People Officer, you are the Chief AI Enablement Officer. How are you thinking about AI adoption these days?

White: AI is changing everything, and people's jobs are going to change significantly. HR needs to lean in and play a role in driving adoption in a productive way within their companies.

Some companies are treating AI as a tool or a technology rollout only, but it's much bigger and broader. For me, it's about 70 percent people and culture, and 30 percent tools. Adoption should be more about nurturing the right mindset, skillset, and toolset, and ensuring that employees understand why AI is so important - why it is changing so many things, and what they can do to integrate AI into their work and really take it to the next level.

Another big shift is the macro environment. There are so many things happening in the world, and employees are feeling a lot of anxiety. It's a challenging time for employees, and HR has an important role

to play in providing clarity. We cannot provide certainty, but clarity is important for helping to minimize the uncertainty.

That clarity is about the strategy and explaining why we're doing certain things and why we're not doing certain things. You have to be transparent - and share what you can, when you can - to reduce the uncertainty and increase the clarity around how employees should be thinking about their work.

Bryant: What is the mindset that employees need for this moment?

White: A lot of it is about curiosity and learning agility - having the ability to learn, unlearn, and relearn. People also need to have resiliency and the ability to lean into change rather than resisting it. It has to be part of everyone's belief system, and this is one reason I've taken on AI enablement as part of my role.

To be clear, I'm not taking on everything about AI here - the engineers are not reporting to me. I'm looking at the orchestration of AI across the company, and that includes driving our AI strategy and enablement. We're teaching our employees about the mindsets, skillsets and toolsets needed, as well as the change curve, given that change is the one constant in the world today.

Reimer: How do you interview job candidates to ensure they have the qualities you just mentioned?

White: I will ask them to share some of the biggest challenges and failures in their career, what they learned from those experiences, and what they did differently after. That helps me understand if people are self-aware.

I'll also ask them what they consider to be their greatest strengths and biggest weaknesses, and how those have evolved. If someone is transparent, they'll share how their strengths have changed over time and how they've doubled down on those.

They'll also share how their weaknesses have changed and maybe improved, and how a new weakness may have emerged over time. I also like to ask what they are most proud of and how their leadership style has evolved. I learn a lot from people from those basic questions because they are very open-ended.

Bryant: What are the key topics that the CHRO should drive with the board?

White: Succession planning should not be a once-a-year conversation. It should be an agile process that includes talking about the skills we need for the future. You assess internal talent, you look at external talent, and you have checkpoints where you bring in that talent and get to know that talent. I think the CHRO should be the key partner in all succession planning.

The other key topics are culture and organizational transformation. The CHRO should provide the board access and visibility multiple times a year to the data and stories that show the full reality of the culture.

Some people only share the good news when they present to boards. That is not the right approach - you should be balanced. The board should be asking the CHRO, What is really happening with the culture? What are the good things and the bad things, and what are you doing about them?

And because of AI, everything is changing. How is the technology changing, and what does it mean for the organization and the business? I think about transformation in those three buckets, and the CHRO should

be involved in all three of them and communicate with the board about them.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you?

White: I'm the oldest. I have five younger brothers, so it was kind of chaotic growing up, but I loved managing the house and telling my brothers what to do. I'm sure I was a micro manager, but I knew from a very early age that I wanted to lead people in one way or the other.

One of my biggest influences was my father. He was an electrical engineer, and he was so good with his teams and, as he moved into sales, his customers, as well. He was always focused on building long-term relationships, rather than going for the short-term win. He kept trying to retire as he got older, and they kept convincing him to stay.

My college years were also a big influence. I played tennis, and I was the co-captain for the last two of my four years. That taught me a lot about resilience, discipline, grit, and a growth mindset. I wasn't the top player, but I was the glue of the team. I was always cheering other people on, pushing them beyond what they thought was possible.

And as a math major, I learned to break down very complex, ambiguous problems that didn't appear to have a solution. Once you get into more advanced math, it's not just about numbers - it's about proofs. You're proving things that are seemingly hard to ever figure out. That taught me a lot about problem-solving and critical and abstract thinking, which have helped me a lot in my career.

Bryant: In your role, I imagine there is no shortage of problems for which there is no obvious answer.

White: The worst thing for me is to be bored. As a CHRO, you get to work on such a wide range of issues. All the context-switching can be very challenging, but I really like wrestling with change and disruption.

Kate Johnson, our CEO, often likes to say that we can make pigs fly. We feel that pretty much anything is possible. When you feel that way, and you lean into the people side of the equation - getting the right people in the right roles with the right culture - there's nothing you can't do.