STRATEGIC CHRO

The Best Leaders Communicate Clearly And They Know How To Stay Calm Under Pressure

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Bala Sathyanarayanan, Chief Human Resources Officer at Greif, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer. Key themes include leading with presence and calm under pressure, building trust so teams keep moving after a leader is gone, and treating governance as core leadership work, not an afterthought.

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

Sathyanarayanan: We operate in over 45 countries, and we have 275 manufacturing facilities across the globe. There are five themes that we regularly discuss in our board and executive leadership team meetings.

The impact of ongoing geopolitical challenges on the global economy is front and center. The second theme is around leadership in an ever-changing world. How do we, as an executive leadership team, adapt and stay agile to ensure that we provide the leadership the organization needs across the globe? We are constantly looking at the capabilities of leaders in our organization.

The third theme is around technology, and that includes more than AI. How do we ensure that we deliver a tech-enabled experience to our customers and colleagues in a way that shows them that the organization cares deeply about them? It's about leveraging tech to help our colleagues do their jobs better and serve

our customers better.

The fourth theme is talent. Do we have the right workforce in each location to execute the business strategy? And the last one, which is often underestimated, is governance for the board and the executive leadership team.

Bryant: How do you think about governance, that last part of the puzzle?

Sathyanarayanan: I'm not just the CHRO of Greif, which is a Fortune 1000 company. I've also been the board chair of a public company in India for the last six years. Most leadership teams rarely focus on governance, but boards are always cognizant of it.

Boards tend to be risk-averse, so it's management's responsibility to ensure that they provide their board the confidence that the risk they are taking has been quantified in a way so that they can manage through it. You have to provide them with that reassurance.

Reimer: Leadership and talent are other big themes you mentioned. What do you consider to be the X-factors of the best leaders?

Sathyanarayanan: The X-factors ultimately come down to a certain presence. Leadership is about having that presence, which infuses a sense of calmness in followers. And without followership, there is no leadership.

How do you lead people to a goal that they couldn't achieve on their own, but you need to make them believe that they could get there? Leadership is not just the difference you made in the teams while you were leading them. It is how the teams act, behave, and continue to move forward long after you're gone.

The biggest currency in leadership is trust, and it's very difficult for you to build that trust unless and until you are confident in your own ability as a leader to empower your team. You have to make it okay for them to fail, because they know you've got their back. Ultimately, you have the accountability of ensuring that you're developing them.

Bryant: What are your best questions for assessing and interviewing job candidates?

Sathyanarayanan: The best questions we ask are all about the ability of the individual to communicate clearly. It goes back to calmness. Good leaders are all about staying calm under pressure. We will ask them about situations where they had to deal with certain kinds of challenges.

In their response, you're listening for whether they can communicate with clarity the situation they were dealing with, the behavior they demonstrated while managing through it, and how they were able to solve for it in a calm way, given the chaos they faced.

We are also looking for their ability to judge and develop talent in the organization. We will ask about the successors they have developed and are developing now. Good leaders build leaders, and they help make those leaders successful long after they stop working with them. That's a real mark of leadership.

Reimer: What were important early influences that shaped who you are as a leader today?

Sathyanarayanan: I came to the United States 30 years ago for my master's degree, but I grew up in India. My parents gave me a deep reservoir of strength. My mom was 14 when she got married. So even

though she was married before she finished high school-it was an arranged marriage-she had an insatiable desire to learn. My sister, brother, and I saw that in her, and it was inspiring. My dad helped give me exposure to the broader world.

I also played a lot of sports, including cricket, which is very common in India, and table tennis. And I was introduced to Boy Scouts, which happened during school-my science teacher was also my scout master, and he shared inspiring lessons about deeply caring for people and helping them. Ultimately, I became an Eagle Scout due to his influence and belief in me.

Bryant: What do you consider to be the hardest part of leadership?

Sathyanarayanan: The hardest part of leadership is getting people to do things they don't know that they should do and helping them achieve those goals.