



We Value People Who Create The Biggest Ripple Effect Beyond Their Individual Role

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Ivory Harris, chief human resources officer for AGCO Corporation, shared candid insights with **Adam Bryant** and **David Reimer**. Key themes include balancing organizational stability with the speed of change through her lake and river framework, leading people through transformation by addressing the head, heart, and hands, and embracing vulnerability as leadership's hardest and most essential test.

Reimer: What issues are top of mind for you now?

Harris: We are dealing with multiple swim lanes. AGCO is an agricultural company, and agriculture has been in a three-year trough. Usually they last about 12 to 18 months, but this trough is likely to continue for many reasons, including inflation, geopolitical tensions, and credit risks. And like everyone else, we are trying to figure out how to go faster with AI.

We have to build the basics to be sustainable and healthy, and at the same time, we have to figure out how to run at rocket speed. I call that dichotomy "lake and river." You have to build stability in the organization, like a lake that is tried and true and reliable, while also figuring out how to run like a river.

Bryant: What have you learned about the art form of bringing people along at a time of such significant change?

Harris: You have to be transparent. You can also use data to help people understand what has happened in the past, as a reminder that we are uniquely capable of taking on a lot of change and that we can learn from it.

I think of change in three components, head, heart, and hands. You have to explain the reason for it and why it's important. You have to explain why it matters to each person. And you have to be clear on what each person can do to help drive this change.

Change is unavoidable, so what can all of us do to be more prepared? My grandma used to say, "If you stay ready, you don't have to get ready." When you are disciplined about investing in learning and developing skills, you will be ready for opportunities when they show up. Organizationally, that means agility. It means we've built the armor to manage the change.

Reimer: What is it about your wiring and background that enables you to thrive in a relentlessly challenging role like yours?

Harris: I'll talk about my grandmother again. She was a Montessori school teacher, raising seven children in really tough conditions. I was the oldest grandchild, and I had an aunt who was two years older than me.

So I learned pretty quickly, as the youngest one at that table for many years, that you've got to speak up and get your ideas across or you're going to be left out. So that family dynamic gave me some resourcefulness that helped prepare me for this job.

Outside my family, the person who had the biggest impact on me was Barbara Jordan, the civil rights leader who served in the Texas Senate and U.S. Congress. She came to speak at my school, and she talked about listening to your own voice.

I can still remember her saying that you're going to hear so many different things about you, what you're capable of, what your place is, and what the expectations of you are, but the loudest voice should be yours. I also get excited and energized by impossible things. If something makes me question whether I can do it, it piques my interest.

Bryant: A lot of C-suite leaders, when they step into the role for the first time, are somewhat surprised by the degree to which people see hidden meaning in what they say, how they say it, and what they don't say. Has that happened to you?

Harris: Yes. I've found that if I answer a question too quickly, people may think my answer is "too corporate." And if I take some time to think before answering, they may wonder, what is she hiding? If people are struggling a bit to deal with all the change, I've found that it's helpful to acknowledge the emotions that we're all feeling, and that it's natural that we probably have more questions than answers.

Once I set that foundation, then I will talk about what they can trust and what I will commit to. I'll also say that I'm not going to have all the answers, and we need to be okay with that. We're an organization of scientists and engineers, and we know how to work a problem like nobody else. There's never been a question that doesn't have an answer, and here's what we can do together to work on it.

It's about making sense of what's behind their question and what's behind the anxiety they may be feeling. So you acknowledge the anxiety and then talk about what we can rely on to be true.

Reimer: What are the X-factors you're looking for in your best leaders these days?

Harris: We value people who can create the biggest ripple effect, as I like to call it. It's about moving beyond your individual performance to creating sustainable impact at scale. And are you a person who demonstrates the ability to learn? Are you curious, and how are you creating an environment where people are asking better questions, which leads to better outcomes?

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

Harris: The hardest part of leadership is showing vulnerability. The challenges we're going to face in the coming years will only get more difficult. So if you're not the kind of leader who says, "I don't know, but I'm going to get the perspectives of others to help me see around corners," then you will fail.

To me, that's the hardest part, to say, I'm a leader, I don't know it all, and I'm uncomfortable. But leadership is doing it anyway.