

CHRO Roundtable: What Is the Unique Value Humans Bring That Can't Be Replaced by AI?

With Felecia Pryor, Heather Ace, and Ray Kleeman

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Felecia Pryor, Chief People Officer of John Deere, Heather Ace, CHRO of Qualcomm, and Ray Kleeman, CHRO of RGA, Inc., shared candid insights with Adam Bryant and David Reimer on leading through the AI era. Key themes include defining the uniquely human value that AI cannot replace, building flexible org structures anchored in strategy, and helping leaders calm the vibration by reducing tension and building energy.

Reimer: What's top of mind for everyone right now?

Ace: AI is at the forefront of every conversation. Like most organizations, we've been on an adoption and learning journey. We want people to be comfortable using the tools to explore and discover. That said, new tools are coming out quicker than people are adapting to them, and with the rapid spike in usage, we are now also having to turn to questions of ROI.

The big questions I see are: what is the optimal relationship between AI and humans? How does that inform the work we do? And what ultimately happens to the role of a manager? What does people management even mean as you start to create more agents? There's a lot of conceptual hyperbole, but what is the practical playbook for operationalizing the role of the manager in the age of AI?

Kleeman: For me, the fundamental question is, what is the unique value that humans bring that cannot be replaced by AI, and are we clear on that and what that means for our business? When I use LLMs, I'm often struck by the fact that the answers they provide are often slightly better than the answers I would give with 30 years of experience.

So how relevant am I? But there's value that humans will provide that will last in perpetuity, and when we are clear about the value that a human will provide over time, then we can start to say what is required of our leaders and build toward that, because that same value cannot be replaced.

Pryor: We were recently having a conversation here around that exact question: What is uniquely human that this technology can't replace? Our team started to build out a list. It's trust, it's judgment, it's wisdom, and it's collaboration. There's something uniquely human about people coming together and thinking through how to solve problems together.

Those conversations can create an important unlock for people, because it shifts the focus to the value we're adding as human beings, rather than the jobs that AI might take away. If we define those uniquely human attributes, we can do two things: we can help unlock our people, and we can help clarify where the guardrails are.

Bryant: How do all these changes that are being driven by AI influence your thinking about the ideal structure of your companies?

Kleeman: When something is nebulous and uncertain and complicated for me, I go back to what I know to be true. In this case, the question about org structure can't be answered unless you have clarity on your strategy. Do you have a point of view around where human value is unique, and what that means strategically for different parts of your organization? Once that is clear, then you can align the organization against that, and you can adjust structures.

All of us have done that forever, but what is different now is the speed that's required. And then you have to think through the potential shocks to other things that also need to be aligned to your strategy, including your culture. If we're removing a large percentage of jobs from a certain area, can we do that in a way that is

aligned to our strategy and doesn't destroy our culture? What impact will that have on our career architecture and how we develop talent?

Ace: There are always outside pressures that affect your strategy and make you revisit your operating model and structure. Right now, it's really fluid, and there's a bit less clarity around org design. Sometimes our job as HR leaders is to help articulate the trade-offs of any decision, so that everyone is aligned.

Any org structure has pros and cons, but ultimately we need more fluidity and flexibility to marshal around business opportunities. Any organization can get stuck in the concrete of their existing structure. So that's a big focus for us right now: how do we create more flexibility in the structure to take advantage of market opportunities while holding our operating expenses relatively flat?

Pryor: That's exactly where we are now, as well. How do we continue to provide ourselves more flexibility? We are not as far along on the journey as we probably could be at this point. But it is all around optionality and flexibility, which is honestly a change for a 188-year-old company like Deere.

Reimer: The theme of first-principles thinking has come up a few times. That seems to be an important role that each of you plays as HR leaders in your organizations.

Pryor: There's a level of anxiety and feeling overwhelmed that our leaders are experiencing, because so much of the news is about AI and how it's going to be disruptive. So we never want to confuse activity for progress. We need to always be asking the question: What problem are we solving for? Within my team and with my peers, that is a constant question because we are also trying to keep people grounded in what they need to deliver today as we prepare for tomorrow.

As Ray said earlier, we need to have a foundational understanding of what is uniquely human and make sure we are clear on that before we say yes to anything. Everything is changing so quickly. Our leaders have built careers around their ability to execute and deliver, so they feel this responsibility to continue to do that. But now the questions are changing, and so the answers and our approaches have to change.

Kleeman: I do think the best C-suite leaders, whether they're in the HR chair or some other chair, do constantly ask, Are we really solving for what needs to be solved for, and are we aligned on that? I think the CHRO is in a unique position to do that well, because we have a perspective across the whole enterprise.

That is valuable when you're monitoring an interaction or a set of conversations among the executive team, and it's not clear to you what exactly we're solving for. The broader perspective, rather than having deep expertise about a particular issue, is often helpful to recenter the team.

Bryant: Heather, in a previous interview we did with you, you said that one of the main roles of HR leaders now is to help "calm the vibration" inside their companies. Can you talk about that?

Ace: It's super challenging. Since Covid, more than half my job has been crisis management amid all the disruption, and trying to keep people calmer and more focused. With my team, that can include discussions about trying to shrink down our priorities and separate the signal from the noise.

A big challenge now is sustaining performance without burning people out, especially when you have employees all over the world. I've been thinking a lot lately about focusing on what you can control, and then helping people with energy management and sprints and taking breaks. We established global holidays where the whole company shuts down for four days a year. Those have been really effective.

Pryor: I tell my team and my peers and other teams all the time that you can get into this spiraling if you're not deliberate about those things you can control. It's hard to see into the future right now, and so you have to be even more thoughtful about what you prioritize.

I've always been very deliberate about sharing how I manage my time and my energy. I'm very open about that with the people who report to me and with people who come to me for mentorship and guidance. I try to encourage them to do the same and to be open and vulnerable about that. That unlocks people to be able to say, "I need 30 minutes to breathe and to get my head back in the game on whatever I'm trying to accomplish right now."

Kleeman: Vibration in an organization is partly a function of energy and tension. And we've used those two ideas to create a simple framework that we use at our company to help people think about themselves, their teams, and the organization at large. We will ask people to plot themselves on those two dimensions. Are you tense and tired? Is the organization tense or tired? Is your team tense and tired? If you are, let's understand what's driving that, because we've got to reduce tension and we've got to build energy.

A core role of leaders is to deal in those two currencies. We all know leaders who can deplete energy in a hurry, and who can create tension in a nanosecond. And we all know leaders who can build energy and create calm. When you get people to step back and talk about what's driving their tension or depleting their energy, then you can do something about it, rather than feeling like you're a victim. It's a simple, practical tool that can lead to very healthy discussions with any team.

In this conversation

MODERATORS



Adam Bryant

Senior Managing Director & Partner



Adam Bryant is a respected and noted expert on executive leadership who has interviewed more than 1,000 leaders for the “Corner Office” series he created at The New York Times and for his four current leadership series on LinkedIn. He is the author of four books on leadership, including “[The Leap to Leader](#)” and “[The CEO Test](#),” both published by Harvard Business Review Press.



David Reimer

CEO



David Reimer is a recognized expert in the leadership development of the C-suite. A former operator himself, David brings hands-on knowledge of leadership, strategy, operations, and mentoring to the subject of accelerating top executives’ impact. He is consulted by boards, operators, and senior HR leaders on developing leaders for an era of disruption.

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