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IBM's Culture Of Transformation

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Published Jun 02, 2021, 10:24am EDT, Updated Jun 04, 2021, 11:52am EDT

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At Workhuman Live Online, Workhuman Cofounder and CEO Eric Mosley and IBM's CHRO Nickle LaMoreaux discussed how continuous feedback, recognition and empathy have built a culture of transformation at IBM.

WORKHUMAN

I had the pleasure to interview Nickle LaMoreaux, CHRO of IBM. She leads an HR team responsible for 350,000 employees in 170 countries. Nickle's a glass-ceiling smasher and an international pioneer in the drive toward a more human workplace. What follows is an edited excerpt of our live conversation.

Eric Mosley: IBM is such an enormous, legendary company, and you have one of the biggest jobs in HR. We'd all love to hear a little bit about your journey with IBM.

Nickle LaMoreaux: My journey isn't that unique at IBM. In fact, it's the quintessential IBMer experience where you get to grow, learn, have global opportunities, and maybe even change career paths once or twice. I've been in HR for 20 years, working on different continents and supporting businesses as diverse as hardware and software-as-a-service. But underneath it all, it really has been about just growing and learning and getting to do new things.

Mosley: As IBM evolved in the last 20 years, is it recognizable?

LaMoreaux: Absolutely. One of our founders, Thomas Watson Jr., said that in order for a business to meet the challenges of the ever-changing world, it's got to constantly reinvent itself, everything except for its beliefs. That is also true about IBMers and

professionals in general.

Mosley: As long as we keep our values consistent, we do need to change and evolve as people, and it's exactly the same with companies and with cultures. What about the future?

LaMoreaux: The next challenge is going to be bringing together the things we loved pre-pandemic and everything we learned during the pandemic. How should we think about the future of work in a post-pandemic world?

One change that happened organically was that employees got together, figuring out how they can better support each other as teammates. Things like “It's okay not to be camera-ready; make sure you're taking time away from the screen and making time for yourselves” Things like being kind and understanding.

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I do think our empathy as colleagues, as co-workers, as managers, as leaders really came to the forefront. As our CEO likes to say, in this virtual environment, every day we were invited into people's homes. We got to meet their children, and spouses, and partners, and cats, and dogs. And, you know, that empathy really did make the experience more human.

Mosley: You recently wrote, “*not since the Industrial Revolution have managers and leaders had to think about work design.*” What does that mean?

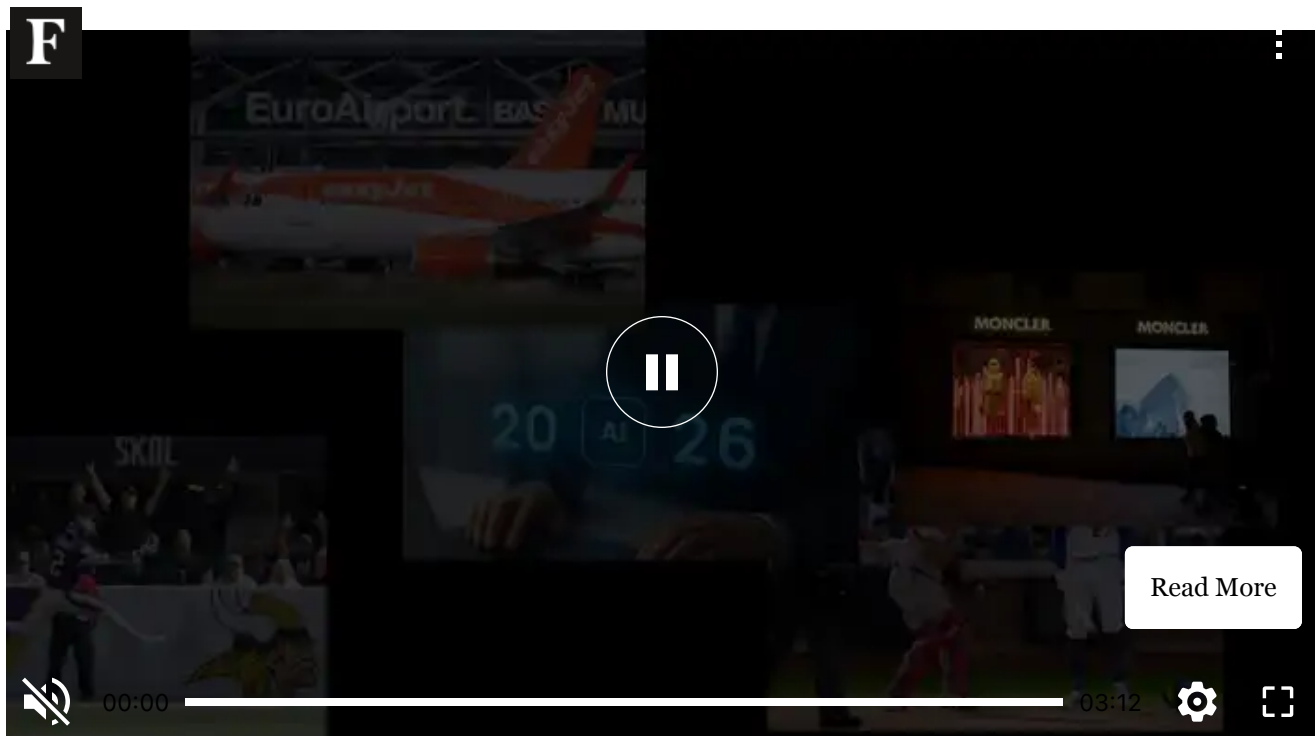
LaMoreaux: There’s a lot of debate about whether work should get done at home or the office, with people taking sides. If you focus on *where* work gets done, however, you can miss out on *how* work gets done. We need to spend time thinking about what's optimal, both on a macro level and a micro level.

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One example is the infamous cadence call. In any sales organization, you have meetings to review the numbers, check the status of accounts, and problem-solve for specific clients. If you unpack that, it's actually three different types of work happening in one meeting. Some might be fine in a virtual meeting; some might be better in the office.



That's just one small example. Moving into the future, we need to deconstruct and examine all our business practices to find the optimal ways to work.

Mosley: Companies got used to patterns that were facilitated by physical reality. If the physical reality has changed, well, then we really can redesign work from the ground up.

LaMoreaux: Yes.

Mosley: There's a lot of talk about cultural transformation. What does it mean for

IBM?

LaMoreaux: At IBM it means focusing on four things. It means focusing on growth both for the business and for individual IBMers. It means innovation. That's a bedrock of why we've existed for over 100 years, and it's really core to who we are. It's about inclusivity. And it's also about feedback.

Some people, even IBMers, ask why we have that fourth pillar. Feedback is as important as growth, innovation, and inclusivity because you can't have those first three elements without feedback. Transparency has to be core to who you are as a company.

Mosley: How do you manage and measure culture in a company like IBM?

LaMoreaux: Culture isn't measured in the corporate headquarters. Culture is what happens in the cafeteria, in your most remote office, or in your most remote client site. We're constantly using our own AI to monitor every aspect of the employee experience, from their onboarding journey to when they take training to how they're interacting in conversations with their manager. And through that, we're getting a really good sense of what's working, and when we're living up to our cultural aspirations and when we're not.

Mosley: Where does the role of recognition and feedback feed into that?

LaMoreaux: Constantly, all the time, every time. Feedback is really making sure that every IBMer is getting continuous information about how they're doing and how they can be better. Recognition and appreciation are really what motivates all of us. It doesn't matter where you sit in the company, at what level you are; recognition gives you that positive reinforcement to know that the behavior that you're exhibiting is very much aligned with the business and the cultural objectives.

Mosley: You're uniquely positioned to have viewed it from the standpoint of employer brand. Tell us about the journey from recruitment to retirement at IBM.

LaMoreaux: It doesn't matter what your on-ramp was. It could have been an internship, or straight out of university, or you could have been an experienced hire. We look at all of your time here, including performance, learning, retention, and recognition. What are your milestone moments as an employee? We're also thinking

about off-ramps, whether you're retiring or you're deciding to go to another employer. We ask, how can we make those experiences just as memorable, so you think about your time with IBM in a great way.

Mosley: I've noticed a bunch of these new job titles like VP of culture and transformation or chief heart officer. It feels like we're trying to make space in the leadership team for investing in culture.

LaMoreaux: Absolutely. Over the years at IBM, we've had people focused on culture and people focused on transformation. But just recently, with our new CEO, we've appointed an SVP of transformation and culture. We brought transformation and culture together because you can't have one without the other.

Mosley: How do you show the return on investment for transformation and culture?

LaMoreaux: There are hard-data ways to measure it like retention, ability to get candidates in the talent market, and how the customer experience turns into revenue. We also think about it in softer ways, things like the integrity of our employer brand. We measure it all because that's how we get a complete picture of our culture as a whole and as individuals.

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