

Chris: Hi HR Nation, welcome to HR Leaders Podcast, a show where we explore a future of work with industry experts and HR executives from the world's leading global brands. Today, we're joined by Aaron Lamers, who's the HR director for Northern Europe at General Mills. You have such an interesting story, so tell us about yourself, and your journey.

Aaron: I'm a New Zealander. Moved to Melbourne, Australia in 2007 and I was there for ten years before coming up here to the UK.

I've had a varied HR career. I studied industrial psychology. I've worked in banking, IT, dairy industry, and spent ten years in Shell, which was a cool experience. And now I feel like I've come home to where I love it the most, in the food industry.

The company asked if I wanted to give it a go coming to the UK and seeing if I could make a difference in the UK.

Chris: How did you manage that decision with the family?

Aaron: I have two kids, they're early teenage years. My son has autism and we were concerned about turning his world upside down. The company's been incredibly supportive. You really couldn't work for a better one.

Chris: So what did the first six months look like?

Aaron: I divided it up into three words that all start with C.

So, it was 'fixing the **core**'. Where can we make a difference in the basics that make all organisation's tick.

Bringing **clarity**, which has to happen at the same time, but also a little afterwards.

And then building **capabilities**. And the 'core' thing took a lot longer than I thought, but we felt as if we needed to look at the structure of things and to see if it was fit for purpose. I think that took us a good year to get through.

Chris: What were the barriers?

Aaron: Processes are the boring stuff. There's no point trying any of the exciting stuff without the processes in place, and we're still battling with it now, as all organisations do. I see an organisation as an organism. It's a system where you have to understand how all the things come together. The sooner a HR team can understand how it creates value, and how it destroys value as well, then you find you want to understand what you can do from a people perspective. And inevitably it's 'people barriers' that get in the way of that effectiveness.

So, my thoughts were 'what parts of the value chain are breaking and where can we make a difference?'

Chris: What are your priorities when building a team?

Aaron: Fundamentally, it's about getting the right people into the right roles. If you get great people and eliminate the barriers, they'll perform in spades. And 'high performance' is banded around quite a bit, and we think carefully on what that means to us.

It was important for me to know what 'high performance' looked like, so that way I could recognise it in the future. And this would mean the opposite also applies. You'll be able to see what low performance looks like and know how to tackle it.

And this is where it's all linked to the processes. If you've got good processes and good data, and if you're sure that you're dealing in facts, then you'd be more prepared for recognising and amplifying high performance.

Chris: I hear that more and more; empowering your employees to make decisions without managers and leaders getting in the way. So, how are you empowering your employees?

Aaron: We've been grappling with this for the last six months or so. In the first few years we were focused on providing clarity, setting targets, giving good direction, and then – before you know it – you feel like you have some control over the business, but if you go too far with that, it can become a suffocating.

Last year, we became the fastest growing food company in the UK. Commercially, we've had some fantastic outcomes. We recognise we're doing okay on that front, but how do we take that autonomy and push it further down into the organisation? It's about creating an environment where people can turn up to work and feel as if they've got some control and a voice.

Chris: What are you most proud of since you joined General Mills?

Aaron: The most rewarding part has been from the work I've done with my leadership team. They challenged us to see if we could bring a new group of people together, but in twelve hours as opposed to twelve months.

We designed a two-day program where we went away and spent time together.

Nowhere fancy, because it was about creating vulnerability, and making us feel a bit exposed, but also putting in place mechanisms to show that we had each other's backs. It helped us build a connection that went beyond your typical day-to-day. We've built some quite good mechanisms off that which have helped us as a leadership team.

Chris: Did you bring in someone external to help with this?

Aaron: if you're going to be truly vulnerable and fundamentally exposed in front of your colleagues, and talk about some quite important stuff, such as things getting in the way of you being the manager or leader that you want to be, and where you want to get to, and how the team can help, then it would be hard to do that with someone from the outside. We deliberately focused on having that conversation for ourselves.

I wanted to do this, but what I wasn't prepared for was getting emotional. It set the tone and left no one else anywhere to go but to do the same.

Chris: What are the good questions you remember?

Aaron: I think it's important to ask what are the deep-seated values that you hold that go against the changes that you want to make. It's like having one foot on the accelerator while having another on the break.

Other important questions are, what are the barriers to the changes they want to make? A lot of these leaders have been in their position for fifteen to twenty years, and it's hard to change. They develop what we call an Immunity to Change and it's about trying new ideas and reflecting over what we've done in the past. As HR leaders, we need to understand this stuff, and figure out how to help these people, and – at a different level – change their practices and processes for the better.

There's a method we use called Speedback. Rather than going up to someone and giving them our feedback, we encourage them to give us their feedback and working on it from there. We may take an hour in a session to focus just on speedback.

Chris: If your team isn't aligned, or if you haven't got that bond, then nothing else is going to happen.

Aaron: The alternative is that everyone's running around trying to prove themselves. And they'll be hiding their weaknesses. Whereas if you genuinely have each other's backs, you can cut off the things holding you back.

Chris: So, after all this development within your team, do you think it's easier to have those difficult conversations?

Aaron: Absolutely. We're not perfect, but even if we have five minutes at the end of a leader team meeting, we'll have a round of speedback. We've gotten to the point now where we're not even waiting for a speedback session, we'll just do it instinctively outside of meetings.

Chris: Because it's now part of the culture of your leader team. And what's the feedback been, since? What have been the changes and what was the initial feedback?

Aaron: My boss does think it brought us closer as a team. We're not frightened of dynamics and rubbish, or any bravado that can often get in the way. The feedback has been good.

Chris: That's very practical. And what's the reading reference you have on this method?

Aaron: For the Immunity to Change? It's by Kegan and Lahey. If you google this, you'll find a couple of nice articles, and there's even a PDF you can download.

Chris: That leads us on nicely to the quickfire round. I'm going to ask you five questions and you've got thirty seconds to give us some amazing answers. So, what was the number one thing holding you back from becoming a senior HR leader?

Aaron: It was probably not broadening out my experiences early enough beyond where I grew up in New Zealand. Taking a role in a couple of different countries has made a difference for me.

Chris: What's the best piece of business advice you've ever received?

Aaron: Understand how a company makes and destroys value. That way you'll be focusing your HR efforts in the right areas.

Chris: What's one book you'd recommend?

Aaron: Well, Immunity to Change, Kegan and Lahey. But my wife did put a book in front of me the other day that might be rather useful. It was Marshall Goldsmith, How Women Rise.

Chris: In terms of your own personal development, can you share some internet resources you use to increase your knowledge?

Aaron: I tend to be a bit of a geek on that front. I like to stick to some of my psyche journals from my psychology background. Applied Psychology is the apex of all researches. LinkedIn is fabulous for inspiration, but I find talking to fellow HR directors and colleagues is irreplaceable. My dad said, you have two ears and one mouth for a reason.

Chris: What's one thing about your business that you're most excited about?

Aaron: Our brand, for sure. I believe in them. My favourite is Old El Paso. Most people think Häagen-Dazs but there's something about Mexican cooking that I love. The flair and the spice. And the cool thing about our products is that they're extremely flexible. You can take bits and pieces of it and add things to it, so it's great fun. We love to think that we play a part in getting families together at dinner time.

Chris: Love your journey and excited to see where it goes from here. Likewise, for everyone listening, if you head over to HR Leaders.com you'll find the show notes on this episode and all Aaron's mentioned will be there for you.

Apart from that, Aaron, if there was one piece of advice you'd give to aspiring HR Leaders, what would that be?

Aaron: Your value chain and your organisation are critical, but once you get that right, it's just a better place to work on so many levels. Of course, it's not all about making money and shareholder return; people have to love turning up, but if you get that right, you got a good chance.

Chris: What's the best way for people to get in contact with you?

Aaron: My email's on my LinkedIn.