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Recorded Message: The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. A free flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community talking about themselves, the industry, and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

Dave: Welcome to The Hennessy Report, I'm Dave Hennessy. Today's guest is Emma Woodthorpe, the CHRO of Mercury Systems. Emma started her life and career in the UK and around the late nineties early two thousands, in the peak of the dotcom boom, she was in the Silicon Valley, experiencing that wild west. Now leading HR at Mercury Systems for the last several years, Emma compares the Silicon Valley dotcom days to the market today in hiring in technology.

To be successful on Emma's team and at Mercury, you can't be a lone wolf. It's all about team and work life balance and integrating nine organizations that they've acquired in just the last three years. Very interesting discussion, I think you'll enjoy listening to Emma.

Next up on the podcast is Margaret Spence, the President and CEO of C. Douglas and Associates. Margaret is also an expert in women in leadership. And now our discussion with Emma Woodthorpe.

Emma, welcome to the podcast.

Emma Woodthorpe: Thank you.

Dave: Well I think I'll have you start with the story about our first meeting.

Emma: I would say you made a really big impact on me. Actually it was a very big physical impact on me. We were in the DisruptHR out in Canobie Lake, which was an awesome place to have it, and we were stood on that stage and it turns out that you like to make big hand gestures. Really big hand gestures, and yes, as your hand came back, not realizing I was there, smacking me in the face and then I was never going to forget you. So thank you for that, you made yourself very memorable to me.

I think the key word is impact, I had a big impact on you as you said. Very embarrassing.

Dave: This is kind of a British invasion of chief human resources, CPOs, you're my third head of HR in just a few months here from the UK. We had Lorraine Goffe, who was head of HR at MIT and now head of HR at Penn State, and your friend Jo Deal, who runs HR and people at LogMeIn. What's going on? There's a lot of you Brits coming around here. Well, I mean this kind of started with a joke, but are there things about your growing up in the UK that does help you in this role?

Emma: I think it does bring a measured approach. The English are known for being a little bit more reserved, although my team might tell you differently at times, but I think we all came over in different ways. The others were offered opportunities. I intentionally came to the US and moved from England to come to the US. That was different, I think, to say how Lorraine and Jo potentially ended up here. I did not want to actually be in a UK company anymore, in that structure. Going to Silicon Valley in 2000, it was like the wild, wild west. What was going on with startups was much more the approach I was looking for.



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Dave: And you were targeting the Silicon Valley area?

Emma: So the story is that in '99 my husband and I came out for a vacation to San Francisco, and we were on a tour boat that was going around Alcatraz. So we had Alcatraz, we had the Golden Gate Bridge, and we had the skyline of San Francisco, and we looked at each other and said this is where we're moving to.

Dave: Wow, so it was a vacation that just turned into a career change for you or career location change?

Emma: Yeah, and then what happened was my husband transferred actually over to Boise, Idaho. He didn't make it to California, he made it to Boise, Idaho. That was in '99 and then I followed him, but I made it to Silicon Valley just outside of San Francisco.

Dave: And how did you finally get back on the same geography? Did you just have a long distance marriage for a while?

Emma: We commuted, this is actually before we were married, so we commuted backwards and forwards from Boise to Silicon Valley for about 18 months. And then his company actually had a presence in Silicon Valley and he said, "Can I please move to California because I'd like to marry my girlfriend and this isn't going to work long term?" They said, "Sure", and so he actually moved to Silicon Valley as well, so we did after 18 months actually end up in the same place.

Dave: That's great. You know we like to start the podcast by finding out a little about people's background. We've got a little bit already here just by our natural conversation, but is there something that you can look back on as an inflection point that set your career path?

Emma: Yeah, so I think that, certainly being on that boat in the harbor was one, as it happened when I came to Silicon Valley I joined a company I had never met the CEO of, I hadn't even been over. I was interviewed in England, they offered me the job in England, and I arrived in San Francisco airport on January 29th, 2000, with two suitcases, nowhere to live, never having met the company.

That was the best decision I ever made.

Dave: So it was a real leap of faith.

Emma: It was a leap of faith.

Dave: And a courageous move by you.

Emma: Yeah, yeah, it was a big risk. I gave up everything back home. My boyfriend, husband now, was in Idaho, so I always knew I had a backstop there, but I couldn't be on a visa for him. So if it didn't work, I had no visa and I had to go back, so it was a huge risk and it was absolutely the inflection point in my career.



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Dave: That's amazing. Well, let's talk about Mercury. Tell us about your business and some things that are going on here that you might be working with from a HR standpoint.

Emma: It's interesting, so Mercury has been around for about 30 years now, 1981, so actually a little longer. It's so funny, when I came here, a lot of people said, "Why are you going to that sleepy little computer company up there in Chelmsford?" I'm going, "Okay, we're not talking about the same company. I'm not sure what company you're referring to, but I don't think this is a sleepy company."

What had happened was they had just acquired a carve-out of a bigger company and had gone from a \$200 million public company to a \$350 million public company.

Dave: Almost doubled.

Emma: Almost doubled, and the same in the number of employees, and what I saw was this company that was on this interesting march. What Mercury does is, we're actually an electronics company, so we're a technology company that supports the defense industry. We're a very innovation driven organization.

One of the cool things about Mercury and what we've done over the last three years is we look at the defense industry differently. We are a commercial model in a defense industry, and what that means is we actually spend more R and D in general than the defense industry does. Our own internal budget is higher, so we spend more R and D, which means we can problem solve, we can innovate, we can do things faster.

Dave: So there's a little laboratory model here in a way?

Emma: Yeah, yeah. So it's really like, "Okay, let's do things in a commercial way that can bring speed to the defense industry." So it's components, it's systems, it's subsystems that go into bigger things, other programs, that defense primes are building or the government in some ways, as well as also aerospace companies. Recently we posted on LinkedIn around our servers being on airplanes, commercial airlines, we keep people safe in the air.

Dave: Oh, so it's not just defense?

Emma: It's not just defense. We also operate into aerospace as well. We think about the impact we're having, in terms of firstly innovation we bring, and then the fact in the end we're helping to save lives and help really protect the country and people and families.

The other thing that I love about this company is the growth. As I've alluded to, we did an acquisition just before I joined in July, 2016. We've actually done nine acquisitions since then. Right now we are well on our way to being three quarters of \$1 billion, we have nearly 2000 employees.

Dave: So you've doubled again, you've doubled twice since...



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Emma: We doubled twice in three years, which is an incredible journey to be on. It brings its own challenges and when you're trying to acquire that many companies and integrate that many companies that comes with its own challenges. Actually thinking about how you support a company where you don't know, in six months is it going to look the same? So even six months ago, since then we've acquired another company in the display industry. You look and it all fits together and it's all very logical, but each one kind of brings more to us, and it's one of the things our customers love about us is what we're able to bring now to them from an innovation and problem solving, is incredibly important.

Dave: It makes a lot of sense. So obviously this comes with challenges when you're trying to bring all these different cultures together at this pace.

Emma: Yeah.

Dave: I mean you're not even done merging one culture and you've already added another one. Talk about how do you do this, how do you maintain a culture with that much integration going on?

Emma: It's funny, you hear this term a lot in other companies, and I've heard this term in every company I've ever worked, always, "the one company," and we have the one Mercury. But I will tell you, I've never seen a company that's made that work in the way that Mercury has made that work in terms of how we go to our customer with sales and how we solution and problem solve with them, to how our teams work together, how they connect. To be that, what you can't be is a holding company for acquisitions. There are many companies out there that are very successful at acquiring companies and holding them and having them as...

Dave: Well, yeah, I think Berkshire Hathaway is a good example of that. They don't merge them in, that's not this model.

Emma: That's not this model. They hold them separately and they're very successful separately. Our model is very different to that, we're fully integrative. So when we bring in an acquisition, on day one their name changes to Mercury. Our brand is very strong so we can do that, and then within the next six to 12 months, they're fully integrated into all our IT infrastructure, our HR systems and also into our culture.

I would say, the one ah-ha we've had over the last couple of years is spending more time on that cultural piece. We're very results driven, it's right there in our culture statement. We get results and we're very good at integrating from that. We've realized we have to take a little bit more time on the culture side and I would advise anybody who's thinking about integrating fully is building a culture playbook and really thinking about what it's going to take to really bring them in to your culture.

Dave: What are some of those things that you're doing now? Things you've learned that you're now implementing to make sure cultures of the acquired firm merges in well?

Emma: Well first of all, to know what culture you're trying to merge into. So the first thing you have to do is know what is it you're trying to be as a company. We actually spent, a few years ago, taking what



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was a great list of our values and turning them into culture competencies and values model. We did that for a very specific reason. When I got here, I interviewed 700 of the 900 employees in Mercury, and without a doubt, what I heard across the board was the culture was why they were here and why they thought we were successful. So when you've got something like that, if you don't write it down you will lose it because you don't know what you're working towards and what your true north is. So we wrote it down. So first of all, we know what our true north is, we know what we want to be and what's made us successful.

Now we have to assess what our acquisition is. The first thing we've learnt, and we're actually trying this with our recent acquisition, is let's assess, do a culture survey on our acquisition to understand where they're at and where are we furthest apart. New hires are onboarded and new hires chose to come to you. They're expecting policies, process, structure, everything will be different, that's their expectation. An acquired employee didn't have a choice. They're coming to you because their company was sold to you.

Dave: So there's some emotions there you have to help get them through.

Emma: There's emotions there and they come with everything intact, so their processes, whatever they were doing as that entity, comes with them. You have to respect it, but slowly change it, or in certain times we've adapted to theirs because theirs was better.

Okay, "You have this business model that we don't have. How could we break that if we integrate you, what do we need to do differently for you?" So we're not a one size fits all, you speak like McDonald's, you do everything the same. It is, okay...

Dave: It's a conversation.

Emma: It's a conversation, we integrate and when we come across things we're not sure about because we've not done them before, we have that conversation. We figure out how they're going to keep doing what they're doing, but in the Mercury way, because in the end we bought them for what they do, so if we damage that, that's a problem for us.

Dave: Right. You've been here a few years now, how has the HR group changed overall?

Emma: The thing that's really important to me about this HR team, and it's something I've seen other teams struggle with, but I've had a really unique opportunity to fix, is that the function has a tendency to stovepipe. The HR partners are over here, the HR BPs are extreme right, the COEs are extreme left, HR operations is off doing its own thing, the service center's doing its own thing, and nobody's really connecting.

What I've seen, unfortunately, in some larger companies is everyone's pointing fingers, you know it's, "I used to do it, I was an HR partner." It's like, "Oh yeah, this is what they taught me to do." I promised myself when I came in this role that I wouldn't allow that to happen.



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One of the things I look for in terms of the softer side is collaborators. You have to want to understand the business and be curious about the business, want to actually work with others on the team. If you stovepipe, you don't tend to last very long here. If you start pointing fingers at others and you're not part of the solution, that could be a challenge. We're very solution, results-driven and we work together to do that. The other thing is, it doesn't matter what part of the function you are in, if an employee reaches out to you, you will respond to that employee and you will help them.

Dave: It's not somebody else's job, that's not the way.

Emma: It's not somebody else's job. I get emails from employees. You know, they've either just got confused, they're not quite sure where to go. I get emails from employees, I respond to the employee. As soon as I get the email, I follow the trail to make sure they've got the person and that they've had their query answered. That's my expectation of my HR people.

I think it's something that's a challenge as we've become business partners that we also have to remember that employee experience and employee partner is still part of the role. I think there was an extreme swing over to the business partner and necessarily the employee part dropped down a little bit. In this market, in the labor market and with the employee experience we're seeing you have to have, you can't do that.

Dave: And I know from your Disrupt talk that you count employee experience from the first time they connect with you from the outside even before they've joined your organization, so that's when it starts. You also in the talk, talked about the term talent acquisition and you don't like that term. Could you tell us why?

Emma: Yeah, I don't like that term because I think it's, "Well we're just acquiring you, we're just kind of finding you and bringing you here." I think it's a little, "Okay, we acquire." We flipped that term a year ago and we call it talent attraction. Names have meaning and when you flip it and call it talent attraction, you realize this is a sale process. They're not just selling themselves to you, you are selling yourself to them.

Dave: And it's not done once you've hired them, you haven't acquired anybody, right? It's constant.

Emma: It's done from the first time that you reach out to them. How did you reach out to them? How did you respond to them? How does your recruiter sound, we call them talent attraction partners, how do they sound on the phone? What can they tell them about the company? How authentic they are?

Talent attraction partners are salespeople for you as the company. They're one of your biggest brand advocates, they're ambassadors. If you don't think about talent attraction, and personally, I think you should think like that all the time, but in this labor market that we're seeing across the world right now, you have to think in this way. We have hired over 600 people in this market and our time to fill is less than 55 days.



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Dave: Wow, that's amazing for the kind of technology talent you're looking for. Do you think it's tougher than when you went to Silicon Valley in the year 2000?

Emma: Yes, I do. I think Silicon Valley at the time was in a very unique time that, I'm sad to say, I personally think has disappeared. If you were a young person who needed to find a rental property, you could find things. Just saying you were in Silicon Valley and that you had startup positions, it was easy to get people to come to Silicon Valley in those days. I do think this is a more challenging market. I think with what's going on in terms of how generations and kind of the size and growth, and companies just have more roles and so there's more roles to fill.

Dave: Yep, that's for sure. Something else from your Disrupt talk that intrigued me, you quoted Henry Ford. At the time he said, "If I asked people what they wanted, they would've said faster horses." What are the faster horses that you're being asked for and what do you end up giving them?

Emma: In HR, what people asked us for was an easy way to get their questions answered.

Dave: Employees?

Emma: Yeah employees, and so that meant, "I want someone to call, I want you to put HR people on my..."

Dave: Get the call center.

Emma: Get the call center.

Dave: Faster horses.

Emma: Exactly, and so I said, "Look, there's something missing here for me." We could go down the phone route, and I challenged my head of operations, who's phenomenal, and I said, "How can we do this differently?" It was very interesting, it was actually a conversation with Jo Deal and what they had done, that started us thinking about Benny. Well ours is not called Benny, but we did realize we are never going to be a high cost HR department from headcount, I won't allow that to happen.

First of all, I think as HR we have a fiduciary responsibility to make sure that we stay within being a percentage of revenue. I think what it also does is force us to think differently, and if people aren't thinking about AI now, they should be. It's coming and it's coming in a big way in HR. So we've purposely kept our HR team a little leaner to force us to think differently. It forced us to move to AI this year. With what Jo had done, we went and looked at it...

Dave: It's a chatbot, right?

Emma: But it's a knowledge base as well, it learns and we've got a knowledge base behind it. Plus it led us to redoing our entire intranet site and putting a fresh feel on it and recognizing what we actually were doing, we were enhancing the employee experience. The intent has never been to take away them



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being able to talk to their HR partner. It's always been around giving them more and we're never going to have enough people to answer phones. I'm not going to have people here at 10 o'clock at night to answer phones from California. It's not necessarily an affordable, efficient model. There are people here who can help and our employees are savvy enough to know how to get to them if they need to call them.

We've started to look at this knowledge center, so we're bringing up the Mercury Employee Resource Center. Center's the only word that's in there, the same as service, no service because it's not a call center. But the AI technology, and ours is actually going to be called Mae, which is Mercury Assistant for Everyone. Mae and the Mercury Employee Resource Center is actually going live with our open enrollment in November.

We basically said, "You wanted this, we've taken you to a completely different level", your AI, the chatbot, having the knowledge center. The response we're getting is, "We like it, we're a little nervous about it." The beauty is that behind the scenes, someone asks a question, they don't get an answer. My team can go in and go, "Okay, we can answer that one right now", and boom, it's up.

Dave: That's great.

Emma: We're putting the chatbot logo on every single intranet page, because behind it, we do have call center technology behind it. So if you need to put a case in, you can put a case in through Mae and it will log a case, a heat-case or a heat-ticket, and my team will pick it up and be able to handle the issue, whatever it is, behind the scenes or the question. And then we'll know what to put in it, so on our learning development sites, there'll be a chatbot. If you need help, press Mae, go to Mae, and then if we can't answer it, we will put the answer up and we'll send the answer to the employee.

Our challenge is going to be, we're going to do this for HR and we're a leader, and I know there's other companies watching us right now to what we're doing, but IT is going to come knocking, marketing's going to come knocking, technology's going to come knocking. They're going to want it for theirs. What we've said is give us six to 12 months to really understand this, but the intent is to take it global. Our intent is, you should be able to get I'd say 80%, because there's always questions it won't be able to answer, but you should be able to get 80% of your questions answered wherever you are in the world on anywhere, any device, anytime answered by Mae. That's the intent.

Dave: Is there any other technology solutions that you're bringing to your HR function or you plan to bring?

Emma: So, it's interesting, I actually read an article last night around AI in HR and I thought the title was very interesting. It said, "CHROs, if they don't have AI as a career skill, they need it and they need it now." I completely agree with that. We actually have a peer to peer recognition software.

Dave: Yes, I've heard about this.



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Emma: Yes, we piloted at one of our sites and then about two and a half years ago we decided to take it to the rest of the company. Everyone's putting all these rules around it, you can't put this profile picture, and you can't say this, and it can't be used for this, and we can't do this. I just said, "Okay, this is what I want you to do." I said, "Just announce it and put it out there, let's see what happens." Let's see what happens.

Dave: See people use it.

Emma: First of all, will people use it and you're trying to put guard rails around the 5%. Stop putting guardrails around 5% that we will handle differently if they abuse the system. 95% of the people are going to use this system just fine.

Dave: Good intentions.

Emma: Good intentions. Two and a half years later we've spent quarter of a million dollars in recognition in that system. It's been the most phenomenal success. People love using it. They can happy birthday each other, high five each other, make comments. It's been a huge success.

Dave: That's exciting. One thing that I know is important to you is work life balance and a lot of people we talk to on the podcast are really discussing, "How can we help people bring their whole selves to work and have a balanced life." Can you talk about what that means to you personally and how do you help others here in the Mercury organization?

Emma: Yeah, so personally I would say this was not something I used to be very good at. At my previous company, I was on the road probably 70% of the time. I was away from my family. I have an eight year old son and a 14 year old son. I was leaving to go to the grocery store and my four year old said, "What week are you coming back mummy?" That was a real wake up call for me and I realized I had missed so much of his life. I'd been through it with my 14 year old, I'd been through it. He was so different and it was a real wake up call for me.

Coming into this role, I still didn't have the balance right. What I realized was, no one was doing this to me, no one was making me work 14 hour days. There was a lot to do, but no one was saying I couldn't go to the gym, I couldn't be home with my family. I was doing it to myself, and what I learnt last year was I had to put some ground rules around how I was behaving and I needed to own it. So I tend not to look at email until 7:30 in the morning, so I get to say hi to my kids, have breakfast. And I tend not to look at email after 8:30 at night. So that's a pretty big tranche though...

Dave: It is, that's plenty of time.

Emma: Plenty of time, I'm lucky enough I only live 10 minutes away, so I'm in the office pretty early. So 7:30 is about right and I'm normally here till about six o'clock, but then I will go home or I'm picking up kids, I'm a fencing mom, as was an article I wrote on LinkedIn. I could find the time to actually exercise, I could find the time to do the other things. Oh, and by the way, I still got everything done because I prioritize better.



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That was a big thing, and I also delegated and my team did. For my team, my expectation is if I walk around here, and I think other people have a little bit of a different nuance, if this is empty at 5:30 where my team sits, that's a good thing. Because it means they've got their job done, and I know they've got their job done because I hear it from the company, and they're out of here and they're enjoying the rest of their lives. If I see them here constantly until seven that's when I actually start worrying and I start worrying about what's going on, what's causing this, are we overwhelmed, what do we need to do, is it short term, long term? I'm very European in that way, that's never left me after 20 years, is people need time with their families.

Dave: Well you know we produced this podcast in cooperation with NEHRA and we always have one question that comes from NEHRA and their emerging HR professionals group. And of course, we have the producer of The Hennessy Report right here with us, Meghan Mandino, and she is part of that group at NEHRA and she has that question of the podcast for you.

Meghan Mandino: Speaking of the articles you've written on LinkedIn, you've written one where you reflected on learning life lessons and handling adversity with your son, *Fencing in the Airport*, do you have any advice for emerging HR professionals on facing adversity, whether it be from their first role or through the process of career change?

Emma: Well, I have a quote that resonated with me about 20 years ago, and it's actually one of the first things I tell any emerging HR professional, which is, "You can please all the people some of the time, some of the people all the time, you will never please all the people all of the time." You are never ever going to make everybody happy in a role in HR. You're going to do the best thing in the world and somebody isn't going to like it. You have to be okay with that because otherwise it puts so much stress on you as HR individuals and HR leaders to be responsible for that and the weight of that. You have to learn that actually 80% or 70% is really good.

I've seen HR professionals, HR leaders, kind of crush under that when they've had those zingers of an emails that I'm sure any leaders listening to this have had, I know I have. You have to be able to listen to it and not take it personally, so that's really important. At the same time, you also have to keep that personal, you have to keep learning and be curious.

I think the other thing that's really important, and I wish I had learnt this earlier, is your network matters. Having a network that you can reach into and go, "I'm thinking about this, what are your thoughts?" in a safe way. Doing that inside a company is not always the place you want to do that, depending on what you're trying to do. Having an external network, both of HR professionals, my network includes past presidents, past CEOs, and there are times I'll go to different groups and go, "Hey, I'm thinking about doing this, what do you think? Am I crazy?" Or, "Does that feel like it's too out there or it feels it's too safe," and I probably only learnt that in this role and I wish I had learnt that earlier. Network matters, keep in touch with everybody you meet along the way. You also have the power of LinkedIn and other things I didn't have when I was doing this first.



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I think those two are really important things for any HR professional. Without those two, it can be very challenging. HR, I believe, is one of the most challenging roles you can have in a company. It is also one of the most rewarding roles you can have in a company.

Dave: That's good advice. Well now this leads to the next question, which we ask every guest, and this is about advice to yourself. So if you could go back and give Emma advice when you were 30 years old, tell us what would be in that letter, Emma?

Emma: Yes, 30 was a defining year because that was the year I moved to the US, and I think if I could go back and talk to myself, in eight years, I lost my job because my company closed and we nearly had to go back to the UK. I got a job, my husband lost his job and we nearly had to go to the UK. Then he nearly lost his job again. We just had so much turmoil. It was turbulent and I think the first thing I would say is, "It's going to be okay, you are going to make it and don't worry along the way about this turbulence, just stay the course." But the other thing I would probably say is, "You're going to have a wild ride and it's going to be a lot of fun and you have no idea what you can achieve."

Dave: That's great. What's an interesting thing about you that you're willing to share that we couldn't find on your LinkedIn profile or anything like that?

Emma: I actually crewed, I rode for seven years and in our division we came sixth in the national championship in the UK.

Dave: A lot of people talk about, on the podcast about, well high performing teams and learning that from high-performing sports teams has a big impact on them. I don't know if you had any ideas, any comment on that?

Emma: Yeah. You know those who are listening to this who have ever been in a boat, especially if the boat's got more than one person in, and you pull those blades through the water for the first time and the boat kind of goes thud one way, and then thud to the right, and then thud back to the left, because you're not in sync, nothing's in sync. Someone's oar is going too deep and someone else missed the water and no one is in time, and then there's this moment where it clicks. I still remember to this day, the moment it clicked for my team and all of a sudden the blades went back together, they went in together and they pulled together and we flew. From that moment on we just won everything we went to, we were smashing, we were just winning all over the country.

That moment that it clicked and we flew, that's what I'm looking for for my HR team and I know what it feels like and it's here. I also know the minute you go back to being slightly out of sync because I've been there. So I can spot when my team is a little out of sync and they will tell you I'm pretty darn direct and say, "You guys are out of sync, what's going on? How do we get you back in sync?"

For me, a high performing team is one that's going in the same direction, in the same stroke, at the same pace, and then understands where maybe it's not quite working. I would say this is one of the best HR teams I've ever had the privilege to lead. These guys are, ladies I should say, are phenomenal. I am so proud.



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Dave: Well, congratulations and thank you for being a guest on our podcast.

Emma: Thank you, it's been absolute pleasure.

Dave: It really has been fun.

Emma: Yes.

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