

Kraft Heinz's Melissa Werneck on Leading in Unstable Times



by
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Kraft Heinz Chief People Officer Melissa Werneck. Photo: Kraft Heinz

AT A GLANCE:

- Kraft Heinz is working with employee coaches and learning teams to increase resilience.
- The company aired a national campaign promoting Canadian produce and Canadian workers.
- Werneck is 'over-indexing' on communication, doubling how much time she spends with employees.

7 Min Read

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For more than a decade, Melissa Werneck has held the top HR job at the HJ Heinz Company and subsequently, The Kraft Heinz Company, where she's helped lead the food company amid challenges such as major mergers and acquisitions, accounting questions, and shifting

consumer tastes. Then came a global pandemic, social unrest, and now growing questions for how the U.S. administration's policies will impact inflation, food ingredients, and global trade. M1 spoke with Werneck to discuss what she's learned about managing her workforce through periods of instability and uncertainty. Excerpts from the conversation, which took place in late March before the April 2 tariff announcements, have been lightly edited for length and clarity.

Let's talk about the current environment. We're facing inflation, tariffs, and much uncertainty on geopolitical issues. How is your organization thinking about navigating it?

What we are doing, and I think other organizations [are doing the same], is preparing for different scenarios. As of now, I think the amount of uncertainty and ambiguity is high. We must help employees navigate ambiguities. We are doing a lot of work on resilience with employees' coaches and our learning and development teams. You have to build this muscle.

The food industry faced so much in the pandemic to keep food on the table and our factories open and producing while keeping employees safe. I think the organization became much more resilient.

The conversation about artificial dyes in the United States is happening in every C-Suite office in the food industry right now. We are preparing for that.

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How are you working on resilience with employees?

We have in-person and virtual coaches who work with the company, and we also use an artificial intelligence coaching platform. You can tailor the coach's approach depending on the topic you, as an organization, are working on. Resilience is one we chose. A lot of the conversations are related to how to deal with ambiguity and how ambiguity can be an opportunity. The other angle is doing this work with leaders, who amplify it across the organization.

As you plan for different scenarios, how are you thinking about your workforce and the skills you'll need?

What we are doing right now—and I think we need to do even better—is over-indexing on communication. We are over-indexing on transparency.

We are tailoring our approach for different groups. That, for us, was a big 'aha' from an engagement survey we did at the end of last year. We [realized] we cannot have conversations the same way we have been.

Vice presidents and above? They have to lead. Whatever we are doing needs to be co-created with them. We have 36,000 employees looking to their leaders for clarity. We need to have a sense of urgency with intention.

Middle managers are the ones under more pressure. They have more junior employees looking at them and they have their bosses [looking at them]. They need more support. With junior workers, we need to say 'look, I know you are feeling anxious right now. There's a lot of uncertainty, but bear with us. The storm will pass.'

Some CHROs have told us they're seeing increasing tensions between employee groups. Are you seeing that between Canadian and U.S. employees?

I'm not. What we are facing is that Heinz is recognized as an American brand and [some global consumers] were saying 'don't use Heinz.' We recently aired a national campaign showing Canadians that the Heinz ketchup that is sold in Canada is produced with Canadian tomatoes by Canadian people at a Canadian factory. We're an American public company, but ketchup consumption in Canada creates jobs for Canadians and we're proud of that.

What changes have you made on DEI?

Our approach has always been very business-centric. We are a consumer goods company, so to better serve our consumers, we must mirror the demographics of the countries where we operate. We are also a meritocracy. We want the best talent that represents our consumer base.

What about changes to ERGs or how you refer to things?

The word 'diversity' ended up having a lot of baggage. In the end, [what it's called] doesn't matter. What matters is the outcome. What matters is what we are trying to accomplish. We believe that for people to feel they belong, and that meritocracy truly exists, you must have all the other building blocks.

That doesn't mean employees are not feeling threatened by what's happening outside [of Kraft Heinz]. I'm talking to a lot of people, not only to communicate, but to support. I had an employee in one of our sessions say 'I'm scared to leave my house, and I'm scared to walk on the streets. ... I only feel safe at home and at work'. I heard from another

employee who said 'I am angry every single day. I wake up angry. I go to bed angry.' It's just being there for those employees, having those conversations, offering them support. Having those genuine and honest conversations is imperative.

How much more of your time are you spending interacting with employees?

I've doubled the time I'm spending doing that, and I'm prioritizing my agenda to have those conversations. Sometimes it's with a small group. Sometimes I skip level meetings with the senior groups. Sometimes it's a one-on-one conversation. We are having discussions with all vice presidents and above in the company once a month—that started in January. Before it was once a quarter.

When you look at all the instability companies face right now, what's keeping you up at night?

At the top of my list is how to navigate globally. How can I have a global approach to something if the trends in different countries are going in opposite directions? That for me is the most challenging piece right now.

For global companies, it's getting complicated from a talent mobility standpoint. I have people who [were] coming to meetings in the United States who are now afraid to come. They say, 'I'd prefer not to go,' even if they have visas and protections and company letters. I'm putting the decisions in their hands and saying we understand. I think it's the most responsible thing to do right now.

Talent mobility is essential for a global company. You need to expose people to different countries as part of their development, and for

best practices to travel faster. Having people declining those moves can put the talent strategy at risk.

Any lessons you've taken from other periods of instability that help you lead now?

I think everybody's pulling from different experiences and different playbooks. Covid was a big learning for all of us, and I think we are better prepared now to navigate [unstable] scenarios than we were before.

What I'm seeing now that's concerning me is I have never seen so many great HR people retiring or deciding to do something different. HR is probably reaching something close to burnout. We have a new generation of leaders coming up who are awesome. But I'm a little concerned about losing the institutional knowledge from all this generation has navigated through.