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A Discussion with Walmart's Rustin Richburg



Rustin Richburg

Boyden's *Leadership Series* presents discussions with business and thought leaders from organizations across the globe. The series focuses on topical issues that offer executives, political leaders and the media insight into current trends in business and talent management in the global marketplace.

This issue features Rustin Richburg, Senior Vice President, US People at Walmart. In the interview, Richburg discusses Walmart's digital strategy, how automation is shaping the future of the workforce, and his approach to talent management.

Richburg joined Walmart as Senior Vice President of Global HR Operations & Technology in 2016, and was named Senior Vice President, US People in 2017. Prior to joining Walmart, he held leadership roles at Imperial Brands and Accenture. Over the course of his career, Richburg has worked in a wide range of industries including hospitality, pharmaceuticals, healthcare and logistics. He has also lived in and managed teams in North and South America, Europe, Africa, APAC and the Middle East.

Richburg graduated summa cum laude from Texas A&M University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in agribusiness. He also holds a certification in program management from the University of Washington.

Boyden: Walmart is the world's largest company by revenue and synonymous with big retail. How are you working to advance people management on this scale?

Richburg: We certainly are the largest, both on the revenue side, but also in terms of employee headcount. What it really comes down to, as we're thinking about advancing our people management and our people experience, is creating an environment where every associate can be their true self and bring their best self to work every day.

We believe Walmart is a place where our associates really do make the difference. Sam Walton, or "Mr. Sam" as we affectionately call him, created the company with the associates at the heart of everything we do. We continue to bring this part of his legacy to life by having great people in great jobs, working on great teams.

Boyden: In recent years, Walmart has earned praise for its digital strategy. How does this line up with Walmart's goals and people strategy?

Richburg: It's taken several years to build the reputation that we now have across retail and customer and digital interfaces. For me, it really goes back to Walmart's business strategy, which is to save people money so they can live better.

Our customers want to save time, they want to save money, and they want us to remove the inconveniences surrounding retail. These fundamentals run through our retail operations, our supply chains and through our digital strategy as well. Walmart has to continue to meet our customers where they choose to shop, when they want to shop and how they want to shop.

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As such, our people strategy is about the compelling intersection between business goals and what our associates need and want. The badges that all of our associates wear in the U.S. read “Our people make the difference.” This quote acts as our North Star. The Walmart people strategy is about positioning our associates to take the business forward and creating great opportunities for our associates, so they can deliver great customer experiences.

Boyden: How have you and your teams leveraged technology for online and in-store sales, as well as talent advancement, at a company with 2.3 million employees?

Richburg: It’s an exciting time for our business. Digital brings a new energy and our associates are embracing these changes. We have e-commerce offices in San Bruno and Hoboken, more than 110 different distribution centers, and over 4,700 store locations in the U.S. alone. This means we have many opportunities to implement digital technology to make the lives of our customers and our associates easier.

We use handheld devices in stores that help associates order stock, plan shipments and check out customers. Robotic technology helps decrease the number of routine tasks and lets our associates focus on helping customers. We’ve even launched an initiative using blockchain technology to provide transparency across the food supply chain for leafy vegetables. These are just some examples of how our associates are leaning into and embracing new digital technologies to improve their own work and make our offerings more compelling for customers.

Boyden: Is automation actually an opportunity for more jobs and better roles for team members at Walmart and other big retailers?

Richburg: In thinking about automation, I often go back to a quote from Walmart CEO Doug McMillon – “People led, tech enabled.” This really means that new technology empowers our associates to work smarter.

At Walmart, it will be our humanity that will make the difference as we continue to embrace digital. It’s our people who set us apart. I also often think about what history tells us about technological disruption. Think about ATMs. Despite what people thought at the time, they did not replace banks. In fact, today there are actually more bank branches because, thanks to ATMs, it became more affordable to put branches in smaller locations.

We also have more bank tellers than ever before. The job has changed, and the services have changed, but the people remain. Our people are a cornerstone of our business. We’re focused on providing them with the tools they need to evolve and meet customers’ expectations and needs.

Boyden: How have Sam Walton’s famous “10 rules” impacted how you’ve managed U.S. HR at Walmart?

Richburg: When I joined Walmart two years ago, I didn’t fully realize how much Mr. Sam still runs the business. He’s left behind an incredible legacy. His 10 simple rules are timeless – committing to the business, sharing profits with the associates and treating them as partners, controlling expenses better than your competitors, swimming upstream – these all remain fundamental parts of our businesses.

These 10 rules are about treating everyone with dignity and respect. They’re about running a great business and, most importantly, about focusing on the customer. It’s important that our associates and partners share this same focus.

Our approach to HR goes back to these 10 simple rules. We keep them in mind when determining how we set our vision, how we prioritize our work, and how we support the business and our associates. Whether we’re thinking about our associate value propositions or providing performance feedback and recognition along the way, we keep going back to these 10 simple timeless rules.

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Boyden: One of the rules was “Listen to everyone in your company.” Can you give an example of how this rule is brought to life at Walmart?

Richburg: Mr. Sam was really focused on responsibility to ensure that good ideas were being recognized at all levels of the organization. Whether you join Walmart in a store, in a distribution center or here at the home office, there’s always an expectation that everyone is responsible for our success. We, in turn, recognize that our associates know best – they know how best to run the company, their store distribution center or department.

For me, though, the greatest testament to the fact that we listen to everyone in the company is the way we approach promotions. We have up to 200,000 annual internal promotions, coming from all levels of the organization. By creating opportunities and promoting from within, we’re encouraging associates at all levels to build careers that can last for decades.

Boyden: You’ve managed or served as a consultant in nearly every major global region in the world. Is your approach to training and HR adjusted for culture, or are there more similarities than expected?

Richburg: I was raised on a cattle ranch in Texas, and I often go back to the advice that my father would give me growing up. One of his favorite phrases was “We all put our blue jeans on one leg at a time.” It is true that there are a lot of things that make us different from culture to culture – the way we’re raised, the experiences we’ve had – but more times than not, I find that we’ve got more commonalities than differences.

From an HR strategy perspective, I’ve always started with what we have in common. At the same time, though, there are those nuances that make us different and unique. Balancing similarities with the need for local ownership has helped me create teams and relationships that work.

Boyden: What is your approach to managing teams on a global scale?

Richburg: There are a few key things for me when I’m thinking about managing and running global teams. First is moving past cultural stereotypes and getting to the heart of how you and an individual are going to work in concert with each other. Here, I’m really focused on how we share ideas and how we voice disagreements or concerns. The second key element is how we provide feedback and performance coaching as part of a team.

We often find ourselves describing culture norms in broad strokes – they’re from Asia or Southern Europe or America and will behave in XYZ manner – but people are individuals. Some individuals, in certain parts of the world, express their ideas very passionately, whereas in other cultures people are soft-spoken. We also see differences when it comes to organizational norms. Again, some people are very comfortable working in a very flat, transparent organization with 360 peer-to-peer feedback, while other individuals and cultures are more nuanced and subtle in the way they provide feedback.

You really have to work to understand each individual and make sure everyone has the opportunity to be heard. When we approach people in this individual way, we see that it drives employee engagement and helps us develop opportunities and careers for individuals.

Boyden: How do you distinguish your time as an in-house executive with Walmart and Imperial Brands compared to your time as a consultant with Accenture?

Richburg: I’m often asked why I left consulting. For me, the choice was less about leaving consulting and more about expanding on what I loved most about consulting. The things that were most exciting to me were the relationships I created, feeling part of the organizations I was working with, and seeing how my contributions made a difference for the organization overall.

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Working in-house, I've enjoyed that same sense of being embedded in an organization and driving change, but the variety comes from a different place. Variety in consulting is based on having different clients in different industries. Variety in-house has more to do with evolving business problems and opportunities. I've enjoyed both kinds of work and took learnings from my time in consulting with me when I moved in-house.

Boyden: You're passionate about diversity and inclusion. In the collective sense, how would you rate U.S. companies' evolution, and in what areas would you like to see more progress?

Richburg: Inclusion is one of my passions. I was raised in a loving, privileged white Christian conservative home in a community where most people looked very similar to me. But I was also a young gay man growing up in the South in a community that you wouldn't expect to readily accept me. But they did – for the most part – accept me, because they'd known me all my life.

Knowing me and knowing my family created a level of comfort. I could not say that everyone in my hometown accepts me as I am. True societal change takes time; maybe even generations. When we think about the need to create an inclusive culture in the workplace, it's very important that employees feel that they can use their voices, and that their voices will be heard.

When it comes to the U.S., almost every single company, and certainly every major employer, has a distinct focus and strategy surrounding diversity. Certainly, you can argue that some are better than others, but it's clear that companies are taking the actions needed to fix internal cultural issues and strive for greater diversity and inclusion. You also have new generations coming into the workforce that are demanding that companies and leaders remain focused on these issues.

That being said, there's still work to be done. There's room for companies to move faster and be more progressive, rather than waiting on

regulations. We're not there yet, and I don't believe there's a single specific destination. Inclusion and diversity in the workplace require continual evolution over time. We have to continue to hold ourselves accountable and set higher and higher expectations.

Boyden: How do you hire? What's most important to you in direct reports?

Richburg: How I hire has certainly evolved, and I reserve the right to get smarter over time. There are of course always technical and functional aspects of a particular position that you need to make sure you're hiring for. But I also believe there are characteristics of high-performing individuals that go beyond the technical aspects of a role.

For me, there are five simple characteristics that differentiate between an "okay" team member and an MVP (most valuable player). I'm looking for active listening, emotional intelligence, self-control, focus and the ability to self-manage.

Whether I'm asking questions in an interview or checking references, I typically go back to these five characteristics to really make sure that a potential new team member won't just fill their role, but be a multiplier for the team as a whole.

Boyden: What's your best piece of advice for people looking to advance their careers?

Richburg: I'm a very social person. I really love being around people and for people to feel comfortable around me as well. The piece of advice I often give people is about networking: Network broadly and network effectively, starting yesterday.

First of all, networking isn't just important for building new connections; it can also help you build new ideas. Secondly, it provides you with places to turn for advice on your career or solving business problems. Third, it opens up new opportunities. Networking is such a simple but critical thing that everyone needs to do more of. I'd certainly give myself that advice.

Vol 9 : Issue 3**Boyden: What is your favorite career achievement?**

Richburg: My biggest career achievement isn't related to a specific point in time. Rather, for me, what's really been most important are the moments when I've seen team members, mentees or direct reports get promoted.

Watching them take on new challenges and grow into new positions and knowing that they're going to do great things and build their own legacies has been one of the most rewarding parts of my job. To me, watching this process unfold for my colleagues has been far and away my top career achievement.

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The views and opinions expressed here do not necessarily represent the views of Boyden, only those of Rustin Richburg.