

People Person

Dedicated to attracting and developing great talent—both in employees and clients—Cathy Backman, Division Vice President of Service Delivery at ADP Canada, offers her best advice for leadership success.

BY LIZ BRUCKNER | PHOTOGRAPHY BY KOUROSH KESHIRI

IF YOU ASK CATHY BACKMAN HER SECRET TO CAREER

success, the answer is simple: “It’s always about the people and ultimately, people leadership.”

The philosophy fits well with her current role as Division Vice President of Service Delivery at ADP Canada. The company offers human resources services and technologies, but she eloquently describes their business as “helping companies optimize their biggest and most important asset—their people—from recruitment to retirement.”

Her people-centric approach has proven effective throughout a career that has focused on two passions—business transformation and mental health. A 27-year career in finance gave Backman many opportunities to build and rebuild businesses to better leverage the talents of the people in them, including a ground-breaking business process for off-shoring capital to India.

CATHY OFTEN SAYS, “THERE IS NO HEALTH WITHOUT mental health,” and she has been a tireless advocate for workplace mental health awareness and support. This year, she completed a three-year term as president of The Psychology Foundation of Canada. “People managers need tools and skills to help employees manage stress in their personal and professional lives,” she explains, “Life throws us many curve balls so teaching resiliency and coping skills is key to a healthy work environment.” While corporations as a whole have come a long way in this regard, Backman believes there’s still much ground to cover. “One of my greatest passions is creating a workplace where people aren’t afraid to start a conversation about their struggles. Helping them speak out and readjust once they’ve received help and are returning to work is the kind of practice every business needs in place.”

Since joining ADP four years ago, Backman has undertaken the sizeable task of evolving the company’s service delivery operating model. “The goal of every business should be to service clients in the best way possible, and that’s the focus of this redesign—to make the model more client-friendly and, in the long term, to drive more loyalty,” she says.

She describes transformation as a journey, and views each step, no matter how small, as progress. From going through every process with a fine-toothed comb, to making substantial structural changes, Backman has been a relentless communicator and advocate. “One of the phrases I live by is: inspect what you expect. Actively managing, walking the walk, talking the talk—these are all vitality important to ensure that the people closest to our client have a voice. As leaders,



it’s our role to remove obstacles so that front line people can successfully meet the needs of our clients.”

Cathy has specialized in transforming business processes and strategies to better serve customers and deliver shareholder value. “I’m in the business of keeping clients incredibly happy, and understandably, their request list is getting longer and longer every day,” she notes. “In this sense, we’re no different than most companies, but our success, I think, is because we spend a lot of time figuring out not just what changes to make but how to implement the changes effectively.” She believes it’s not enough to have a great idea; successful companies are able to build a business case for change and supply the tools and structures required to implement the transformation.

ANOTHER MUST ON HER TIPS FOR MANAGEMENT SUCCESS?

Know your people. “I’ve gone into every position I’ve held wanting to leave it in a much healthier state, and I make it my goal to spend a great deal of time finding out who the people comprising my team are. Once I decipher what kind of environment they need in order to thrive, I cultivate it, which unleashes them to do their best.”

Last but not least, Backman offers this bit of advice: “Create a vision of the future that inspires your people, give them the tools to build it and a supportive environment where they feel safe, and then stand back. They will amaze you every time.”