Driving Renewal, hosted by Satu Rekonen

Episode 2: Show Interest In People's Experiences in Times of Change – Guest Charlotte Guillou, WithSecure

Satu: Welcome to the Driving Renewal podcast. This is a podcast series from Aalto University's Department of Industrial Engineering and Management, where I discuss organizational renewal with various experts. My goal is to understand what renewal looks like in different work environments, what it means in practice, and what it requires from us as people. I am Satu Rekonen, a university lecturer.

In this episode, my guest is Charlotte Guillou, Chief People Officer at WithSecure. WithSecure™, formerly known as F-Secure, is a Europe-based cybersecurity company dedicated to protecting businesses and fostering strong partnerships with clients and collaborators. With over 35 years of experience, WithSecure™ has developed its product range to support proactive cybersecurity.

Charlotte has been involved in renewal and development projects across various companies for over 20 years, focusing on areas such as the integration and transformation of operational models, cultures, and strategies. Her career has also taken her to international roles in countries like Hong Kong and Sweden. Charlotte highlights the importance of engaging and motivating employees and leading with values, which have proven to be powerful drivers in her renewal processes.

At WithSecure, Charlotte has led a multi-year transformation to align the company's values, leadership principles, and culture with its organizational growth goals and strategic objectives. According to her, connecting values to concrete daily behaviors and fostering systematic collaboration with leaders are key success factors in driving change.

Welcome to the Driving Renewal podcast, Charlotte!

Charlotte: Thank you! It's great to be here and have this opportunity to discuss this topic with you.

Satu: Let's start by exploring your journey at WithSecure, which began just over three years ago, coinciding with the start of a significant transformation journey for the company. Could you share some insights into the situation when you first joined WithSecure?

Charlotte: We began over three years ago by reflecting on our company's strategy and reassessing our business operations. At that point, it became clear that our consumer and B2B businesses operate, and should operate, under slightly different business logics. We realized that both would benefit from growing independently as separate entities due to their distinct dynamics. As a result, we began developing comprehensive plans and exploring various opportunities and options.

After careful consideration, it was decided to split the companies. Our consumer business would become a stable, independent entity, while our B2B business, WithSecure, would also operate independently as a growth company.

We began driving this change by reflecting on what good leadership looks like and how it aligns with our values. The focus was on understanding that the two businesses operate under different logics and determining how to move forward in building them successfully.

Satu: That sounds like a very interesting, yet likely challenging, setup. What do you see as the biggest differences between a mature company and a growth company? What factors need to be taken into account in that context?

Charlotte: That's a great question. There isn't a single correct solution or answer, as every company is unique in this regard. In a mature and profitable business, the pace can often be more gradual compared to a growth company, where the dynamics and drive are perhaps faster—or at least that's how I've experienced it. This difference can be seen inin various aspects, such as reward models. For instance, do you have a structure that supports risk-taking and includes variable reward components, or do you rely on basic reward models that primarily incentivize steady, continuous work? Additionally, the level of risk tolerance can vary significantly between these two types of companies.

Satu: How did you go about adapting your operations, strategy, and values to align with and best support this new way of working?

Charlotte: That certainly didn't happen overnight. In my opinion, these kinds of transformation journeys, when talking about ways of working and culture,

are at least three-year projects before you start seeing changes in how we operate and how the culture evolves.

We set out to reinforce and realign our values, carefully considering which ones would best support us on this journey. Additionally, we reflected on the leadership principles needed to propel us forward. The focus was on recognizing that there isn't a single correct way to lead throughout the company's lifecycle; rather, it's about identifying what will help us advance at any given moment.

From there, we started working together. The leadership team held workshops to assess cultural observations, understand how we operate, and derive leadership principles from those insights. We defined what "good" looks like in the context of our strategy. And then we also started working on the values together. We took a very inclusive approach, involving our people globally from all our different countries as well as from all the various business areas. We began reflecting on which values might remain the same and what new elements we needed to introduce.

Satu: What kinds of values or leadership principles did you establish as part of this process?

Charlotte: Our values were reinforced during this process—some were existing values that we reconsidered and strengthened, while others were newly introduced. For us, everything starts with trust.

Then there's integrity, , and excellence, reflecting how we approach our work. We also introduced two new values: experimentation, representing a willingness to try new things and foster a culture of experimentation, and care.

We then started working on these together with all of our units and teams, and after that, we've been focusing on them long-term with teams and line managers and leaders, exploring what these values mean in terms of everyday behaviors.

It was important to ensure these values didn't remain just a list on the wall. We needed to define what they meant in terms of daily behavior, and identify what changes we wanted to see in our actions. To do this, we conducted workshops with teams, allowing them to reflect on behaviors that align with the values, and what aspects of our practices needed to evolve.

Among these, the culture of experimentation has likely been one of the most significant changes we've seen emerge.

Satu: Can you share examples of how the value of experimentation is reflected in the team's daily activities?

Charlotte: That value, I would say, has also been somewhat challenging in the sense that, on one hand, there is a natural tendency for experimentation, continuous improvement, and learning, but on the other hand, the question arises: does it apply to everyone?

That has perhaps been our theme—that curiosity and continuous learning are part of every role and every task. Through this mindset, we try things out, learn quickly, and then try again if something didn't work.

In everyday work, it can be seen as simple suggestions to try new ways of doing things. Recently, it has often shown up as experimenting with AI—for example, trying out how it could support tasks or whether it can accomplish something. It can also take the form of larger changes. We've shifted our ways of working to more agile methods, such as in our product development. Even in my team, People & Culture, we've adopted agile practices where we pilot, experiment, and act quickly.

Whether in big transformations or in small, everyday tasks, we encourage our people to dare to try new approaches and embrace learning through experimentation.

Satu: And experimentation is strongly tied to a sense of incompleteness— whether it's about the way of working or the idea or thought itself. I've come to understand it more as putting oneself out there, which can evoke emotional experiences, making it not so easy for everyone.

Charlotte: Exactly. This was one of the key realizations when we started working on this. We are a very strong expert organization with top-notch professionals. In our field—especially in cybersecurity—it's critical to ensure things are done correctly. This creates a natural tendency toward striving for perfection, where only fully finished products are moved forward.

However, fostering an experimental culture requires a certain vulnerability. It means daring to open up and share work even while it's still in progress. This has been a challenge even within my own team—sharing ideas or work in its earliest stages, even if it's just a couple of sentences, and then working on it together.

This brings us to feedback culture and a safe work environment. We often talk about psychological safety, and that's exactly what it's about—the courage to show something that isn't finished yet. Then, together, we can develop it further.

Collaboration is another key aspect. No one succeeds or moves things forward alone. If we think about the business world, it's about how we promote collaboration and about working together across different functions as well.

Satu: Hargadon and Bechky have studied organizations that excel at complex problem-solving. Their research focuses on the interactions that support collective creative problem-solving, identifying three key types of interactions. One recurring element in organizations that succeed in this area is a low threshold for seeking help.

This means individuals feel free to ask for help without stigma—there's no shame in not knowing something or needing assistance, even as an expert. At the same time, it's equally important to provide help quickly and effectively to others. These real-time interactions often lead to reframing the problem, which enables progress in your own work.

Charlotte: Yeah, it's really interesting. I need to read and delve into it myself as well. What comes to mind for me is that during this period of change, we decided to emphasize participation and transparency as key themes. In my opinion, these are crucial for any type of transformation. To support this, we adopted OKRs (Objectives and Key Results) as a methodology for implementing our strategy, ensuring transparency across the organization.

The company's top-level goals and key results are set annually and quarterly, and each team links their objectives to these overarching goals. This process answers the question: What is my or my team's contribution to the company's top-level goals or strategy, and what are we delivering?

Making this transparent is a long process, but as an example: We need to encourage everyone to indicate openly whether everything is on track, if there are challenges, or if help is needed. It should be okay to say, "Hey, we're in the orange zone, and we need assistance."

Culturally, this can be challenging—it's not always easy to admit you need help. But this practice is essential for renewal and agility. Raising the flag early allows us to quickly get the support needed from elsewhere in the organization, ensuring continued progress.

This is still a learning journey, and we're not there yet, but bringing transparency and adopting new ways of working have been critical elements of our progress.

Satu: Absolutely, it's not easy. I'm currently developing a new master's course and realized it would be valuable to ask my colleagues for help and insights to make the course as strong as possible. But then there's that nagging feeling—shouldn't I, as a university lecturer, already know what I'm teaching in my course?

That's the most important thing—having structures that support and enable this allows you to move forward. It also made me think about experimentation: successful experimentation is ultimately about learning. Even if something goes wrong, as long as you learn from it, it's still valuable.

Do you have any forums or arenas for sharing those learnings within your organization?

Charlotte: We don't have company-wide forums for this yet—it's an area we still need to develop. Within specific functions that have adopted these practices, we conduct retrospectives or reviews within teams. For example, through OKRs, we hold retrospectives where we reflect on the key results: what went well, what didn't, and how we can improve for next time.

It's a valuable way to experiment and learn through OKRs, but we've yet to implement a broader, company-wide approach for sharing learnings.

Satu: Charlotte, how do you see your role—and your team's most important task—during these major changes? So that the change would somehow be human-centered?

Charlotte: That's a great question. Our main task is to be present and attuned to hidden fears, uncertainties, or emotions, and to take the initiative to bring them to light. These need to be addressed openly, ensuring participation and staying true to our values by acting in alignment with them.

Supporting supervisors in their actions and being available to help when they need support is essential. Change only happens when people actually start doing things differently. While processes and other aspects play a role, bringing issues to light is a significant part of driving meaningful change.

Satu: You mentioned the importance of presence and interactions with people. I'm curious—since you're an international company with staff around the

world, how do you handle presence in daily interactions when you're physically with people? And how do you manage these interactions remotely?

Charlotte: Yes, this gets to the core of hybrid and international work and the challenges that come with it. From the beginning, it's been important for our leadership to physically meet with people, taking the time to have a coffee, a chat, and get to know them. That personal connection is the starting point.

Equally important is being mindful of time zones when scheduling info sessions, whether for managers or others. For example, my team holds regular monthly meetings to discuss updates, share insights, and support each other. We adjust the timing to accommodate participants from the U.S. to Asia, ensuring we have sessions in both the morning and afternoon Finnish time. This way, no one region is unfairly asked to join in the middle of the night.

Another key aspect with international teams is ensuring decisions aren't made in hallway conversations, which could exclude others from the decision-making process. We recognize that not everyone can always be present. That's why we rely on forums, meetings, and other gatherings where collective decisions can be discussed and made transparently. Without these structures, people risk feeling left out.

Satu: You mentioned earlier that quite a lot in your organizational culture revolves around psychological safety. How do you think it can be created and nurtured within the work community?

Charlotte: With consistent and systematic leadership meaning doing what you say while standing behind your people and supporting them. Take, for example, fostering a culture of experimentation. This includes accepting that sometimes things won't work out, but you learn from those experiences and move forward.

As a leader, how you react when something doesn't go as planned is crucial. Do you start monitoring more closely, or do you provide support, offer a new perspective, or ask how you can help? Supporting and learning together builds trust and reinforces the experimental mindset.

I also believe that personal interactions in the workplace are incredibly important. Yes, the work itself matters, but meeting people as individuals and showing genuine interest in them is equally critical. It doesn't take much time to ask how things are going—whether at the start of a meeting or during one-on-ones—just taking a moment to connect and check in.

This creates a sense of closeness, showing that you genuinely care. Of course, this must come from a place of authenticity; superficial gestures won't build trust. Genuine interactions foster personal commitment and trust.

Then, perhaps thirdly, at the company and leadership level, it's about consistency—sticking to decisions and supporting each other in those decisions. We can disagree in the room when discussing ideas, but once a decision is made, we must speak with one voice. This unity builds trust in the company's direction and strengthens belief in what we are doing.

Satu: Indeed, when thinking about teams working together, there can be a wide range of perspectives. The most important thing is ensuring that everyone feels they can speak up and be heard. However, once a decision is made collectively, the team's decision or benefit must take precedence over individual preferences.

Psychological safety has been extensively studied in teams, and I found it quite interesting that teams with high psychological safety had members who participated in discussions almost equally. These teams foster an environment where everyone feels they can share their views. Additionally, these teams are often more sensitive to non-verbal communication cues. For example, if they notice that a team member doesn't seem quite themselves—even without that person saying anything—they become curious, ask about it, and open up the conversation. This attentiveness helps the team address underlying issues and move forward in their work.

With the ongoing changes at WithSecure, as you mentioned, the renewal is still continuing. Have you encountered any challenges or resistance to change among people along the way?

Charlotte: Surely, every change comes with its challenges and resistance; there's probably no change without these two. And that's part of everyday leadership. When we talk about meeting people and being present and knowing them, you build that trust and move forward. But another thing is to stop and try to understand why there is resistance to change and what the reason behind it is.

In my years of leading different change initiative, I have recognized that there are different types of change resistance, which can perhaps be divided into four categories. One type might be a person or profile who believes in the change but feels that we are moving either too quickly or too slowly. They believe we can't achieve the business goals at the current pace or feel that we aren't making changes fast enough. Another type might be someone who is uncertain and worried about whether they want to be part of this journey.

In many companies, when you look at its past, there may be various changes, mergers or different cultures brought together, and it's not always certain whether everyone is aligned with the new direction. It's entirely human and normal to reflect on this, but resistance to change can stem from it.

Then, as the third category, I might describe it like this: change can challenge a performance model that has been typical for you. For example, if I have advanced in my career by excelling in a culture that values and rewards individual performance, and now the focus shifts towards team performance and collaboration, I might fear that I won't be able to keep up. This type of resistance to change doesn't necessarily stem from opposing the changes themselves but rather from a very human concern about one's ability to adapt and succeed.

Another category, which can be harder to identify, is related to the fact that we humans can only handle a certain amount of change at once. There may be underlying personal challenges that we don't reveal at work, such as significant changes in our private lives, which make it feel like we simply can't cope. In these situations, resistance may appear as resistance to work-related change, even though it is actually due to personal fatigue from external factors.

These are the four types, but I think it's essential, when driving renewal, to not only recognize that resistance exists but to also strive to understand what's behind it. By doing so, you can discover ways to communicate and involve people more effectively.

For instance, with the first category—those who feel things are moving either too slowly or too quickly—you can gain valuable insights into what could be adjusted to avoid these perceptions. For others, it may be about building bridges from the old way of doing things to the new, or encouraging them by saying, "You've got this."

Satu: Do you think these require different approaches from leaders to provide the necessary support?

Charlotte: Yes, I believe the challenge in leadership lies in adapting to both the situation and the individual or team you're working with. The direction must be clear, but there are often many ways to engage and inspire people. We are all individuals and should be approached as such. Rarely does one style suit everyone.

Satu: You mentioned earlier that a lot of changes are happening, both within your organization and in the world. There have been the pandemic years, a war in Europe, and generative AI rapidly transforming things—truly significant global phenomena. How do you see the kind of leadership this era requires, perhaps because of these factors as well?

Charlotte: It's about being present and attentive, understanding, and also about providing direction.

Change is constant in the workplace and around us, but if you can stay on course and be that support and security in some way, even when changes come, it helps. It's about meeting and listening. You really have to listen.

Satu: What have you found to be the most challenging in your role?

Charlotte: The most challenging or difficult aspects have been the numerous changes all around. Overall, the sheer amount of change—understanding that people have endured the pandemic years, war in Europe, and significant shifts in their personal and professional lives—has been immense. First and foremost, it has been about explaining why these changes are necessary in the business environement.

We have faced challenges and had to make tough decisions regarding cost structures, which have included reorganizations. Unfortunately, some job positions have been reduced over the years. These decisions are always incredibly challenging and, in my view, should feel difficult—they're not meant to be easy. Restructuring is always one of the hardest aspects of leadership.

Additionally, global events in recent years have added another layer of complexity. For instance, when the war in Ukraine began, I was supposed to start change negotiations that same day. Instead, my day shifted to speaking with employees, including calls to our Ukrainian staff who were trying to locate their families. Situations like these throw everything into more chaos, adding the challenge of maintaining focus and direction while supporting people through their concerns.

Generative AI—we definitely want to utilize it. While we are likely ahead in many ways and see AI as an opportunity, it understandably creates anxiety for some. Questions like, "Does this take something away from me?" or "Could this actually enhance my work?" are natural.

So how do you manage and lead amidst all this? It's crucial to manage and lead with clarity and care, ensuring that the workplace remains a source of joy and fulfillment. It's essential to make it a good place to be. Those are probably the biggest challenges, but they make the work meaningful, touching, and genuine for me, as they involve addressing real concerns and finding solutions together with people.

Satu: Very well said, and it seems like there are many things you simply can't prepare for. Changes happen, often beyond your control, but what matters is living through those changes alongside employees and being present and engaged throughout the process.

I'd like to explore AI and its impact on leadership a bit further. How do you see the role of AI in leadership work?

Charlotte: This is one of my favorite topics at the moment. However, I believe we still don't fully know how AI will change our work or the nature of leadership. Personally, I'm very curious about learning new things and exploring how AI can support us.

And yes, in leadership, I see AI as an additional tool to enhance our work. Even now, for example, I use AI daily to help conceptualize and brainstorm ideas and thoughts. While it's important to verify its relevance and accuracy, it already serves as a valuable brainstorming partner, helping me gather information quickly and gain insights into different perspectives. It allows me to speed up information gathering and get a sense of how things might look in various contexts, providing immediate answers without extensive searching.

I believe AI brings speed and broad perspectives, but it also comes with significant risks. The challenge lies in learning how to utilize it effectively and responsibly. That said, I don't think AI will replace the closeness or human touch that is essential to leadership.

Satu: As the use of artificial intelligence becomes more prevalent, do you think it will change the types of skills that leaders need?

Charlotte: Certainly, it will change the required skills over time. In fact, it's likely already happening to some extent—whether leaders can integrate AI into their work in meaningful ways is becoming increasingly important.

However, I can't say exactly how this will evolve just yet. On the other hand, I like to imagine AI as something that could eventually serve as a personal coach for every leader . How incredible would that be?

As long as it's developed in the right direction, and we also ensure that leaders also cultivate critical thinking skills. It's essential to approach AI outputs with a healthy level of scrutiny since you can't yet fully trust it will always provide the most accurate answers.

Satu: Exactly. I've also been reflecting on my own relationship with AI—I always wish it good morning and ask how it's doing! I guess I have a need to humanize this helper of ours.

It would be great to hear your experiences and lessons related to driving renewal within an organization, particularly from the human perspective and how to support it. What do you see as the most critical aspects of your role as an HR leader when the organization is undergoing significant changes?

Charlotte: I would start with inclusion and involving people, considering different perspectives, different individuals, different approaches, and then humanity. Those are probably the most important. And then transparency.

Inclusion, humanity, and being present, understanding people's needs during change, and openness and transparency are all crucial. It's important not to hide behind anything but to openly explain why certain changes are being made, what we aim to achieve, and how we plan to get there. Ultimately, this process happens together with people.

Satu: What do you believe are the essential skills or attitudes required to effectively drive renewal within an organization?

Charlotte: Courage and curiosity, in my opinion, are essential in everything. It's about being genuinely interested in what's happening around you— interested in people's reactions and understanding why they respond the way they do. This awareness allows you to adapt your actions accordingly.

As an individual, you can't possibly know everything, and that's okay.

Satu: That's great. If you were to share some lessons on driving renewal or implementing change within an organization with others in similar roles elsewhere, what key insights or advice would you offer?

Charlotte: If I had to summarize three key points, the first would be to clearly communicate why the change is happening and what the goals are.

Secondly, involve people in the change journey. Ensure that the process is collaborative, working together to figure out how to achieve the best results.

And thirdly, be persistent and systematic. Renewing something like culture is a long journey—it's a project that spans several years. When challenges arise or things get busy, there's a natural tendency to revert to more familiar ways of working, but it's crucial to push through and keep moving forward without getting discouraged.

Satu: And certainly, support and interaction within the organization will play a significant role. Lastly, I'd like to ask: where is WithSecure currently in its organizational renewal, and what does the future look like in the coming years?

Charlotte: The coming years look really exciting—it's a continuous journey. We've recently been working on a strategy renewal and are moving forward with a clear direction, continuing to build on our path. In the next steps, we may focus on further enhancing collaboration and accelerating our progress. I'm eagerly looking forward to the months and years ahead on this renewal journey.

Satu: Thank you so much, Charlotte, for being a guest on this podcast. I truly gained valuable insights into leading change within an organization.

Charlotte: Thank you.