



## The Strategic CHRO: Donna Morris of Adobe on Creating Value and Impact

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*Exciting news: David Reimer, the CEO of The ExCo Group, and I are launching an interview series with top leaders in the HR field who are transforming the role of the chief human resource officer by driving impact across their organizations. To kick off the series, we reached out to Donna Morris, Adobe's executive vice president of customer and employee experience. Her widely recognized accomplishments, like abolishing annual performance reviews in favor of regular check-ins, have earned her an ever-growing list of responsibilities at Adobe beyond her core HR role, including spearheading efforts to attract and engage customers as well as employees. We're confident you'll enjoy reading Donna's smart, provocative and compelling insights. And stay tuned for more interviews in coming weeks with other leaders in the HR field.*

Q. The “strategic CHRO” label gets tossed around a lot. How do you make that idea real?

A. I personally would not take a job unless the HR function reports to the CEO. It's a nonstarter otherwise. If HR reports to the CFO, you're going to get a cost-based HR leader who is removed from the ability to make objective decisions.

I'll go one step further and say that the head of HR should not only report to the CEO but should also have a core relationship with the board of directors. The HR function should be pretty independent, just like audit is on the board. If you really are going to act as an ombudsman for the effective operation of your organization, you have to feel like you can push back against your peers and even the CEO.

I was fortunate in that, from the beginning at Adobe, I had a seat at the table. And there's a difference between having that chair and using it to your advantage. I am naturally driven to impact. I'm not going to sit around and not have a voice. It's just not who I am.

Q. If a CHRO were doing due diligence on a company before accepting a job offer, what should be on their checklist?

A. First, do you really understand the business you would be joining and what the role of HR would be in that business? And in doing that diligence, you really have to understand the financials – is it a growth scenario, maintenance or restructuring? That's going to shape your role and potential for making an impact.

People change roles, so you can't be too dependent on which CEO you're going to report to, because they may or may not have longevity. We're unusual at Adobe in that our CEO has been with the company for more than 20 years. But many CEOs have tenures of only three to five years. Also, find out what the values are. If the company were a person, what attributes would they have? And do you believe that you could be successful in that culture?

Second, you have to be clear about expectations, from the CEO and ideally from the board. What does success look like for the company and the CEO? How is it going to be measured? That's critical because it gives you a good indication of how they think of the business opportunity.

Third, you have to really understand who you'll be working with as your peers. The CFO is particularly important, and so is the CMO, because in our kind of business, the brand is so essential in terms of your ability to attract talent. You want to know who your other peers are, as well, because HR is an unusual position. They're going to be your peers but you're also there to help them be successful. So you have to assess whether you'll be able to influence those people.

A lot of CHROs miss the importance of those peer relationships when they come into a new role. They focus so much on the CEO relationship and the strength of their HR team that they miss those lateral connections.

Q. If a CHRO at another company called you for advice because they were promised a seat at the table but the reality is they don't have one, what would you tell them?

A. The first thing I always ask is how much due diligence they did at the outset. But then I tell them that in terms of the meetings, it goes back to relationships and providing value. I've sometimes had to tell people that they can't just be fixated on whether they are at the meetings – if you're at the meetings but you don't follow through with any impact, then eventually you don't get invited.

In those same discussions, I have often asked, is your own foundation in order? If others in the company still think that your function has trouble hiring people or retaining people effectively or monitoring or addressing employee concerns, then it's going to be hard for them to think that they should be inviting you in to talk about key organizational changes they need to make.

The hardest scenario that CHROs find themselves in is that they didn't know what they were getting into, because they're facing a lot more issues than they thought and the CEO said all the right things but they're really not up for the change. In that scenario, you have to demonstrate little wins along the way.

Q. If you were speaking to a room full of 100 CEOs, and you could give them some blunt advice on maximizing the return on their investment in a strategic CHRO, what would you tell them?

A. The success of a company, for the most part, is always going to come down to the investment that you make in people in leadership. I don't know how it doesn't. The majority of CEOs spend a disproportionate amount of time fixated on financials or fixated on their core product and business, and a much smaller percentage of time fixated on what their organization really looks like.

Is it designed for success? Do they have the right players? Are they investing enough in developing the leaders of the future? Do they really invest as much time in people and leadership as they do in other areas? I would say the majority of them don't. Maybe they don't need to if they have a really strong HR function. But even then, they have to send that signal that it's important to them as the CEO of the company.

If you want to lead a successful company, the core asset you have is the people who work for you. What have you done for them lately? Have you heard from them? Have you spent enough time thinking about how the company is structured, and what kind of talent you're attracting?

Q. Let's shift the audience to a group of CHROs. What would you tell them?

A. I would start by saying that, apart from the CEO's role, being a CHRO is the loneliest job by far. Because if you're doing your job well, you actually are not making fast friends all the time. So you have to build incredible trust and credibility with everyone immediately. If you don't do that, you'll never be successful.

Second, you better know your business, and not fixate on shiny new programs. Focus instead on what's going to help your business be really successful. If that means getting rid of some of your shiny programs, you better fess up and disrupt the very things you might feel wedded to.

Third, you've got to role model everything you're asking every other leader to do. The bar for you in terms of people leadership is actually higher than the bar for everybody else. What's your strategy in terms of attracting talent, developing talent, and managing performance? If you've got an employee survey, you better not be the lowest on the totem pole in terms of organizational health. People should be envying how you lead.

Finally, you have to demonstrate humility, and that it's not about you. It's about the company's success and it's about all the other leaders' success.

Q. Let's shift the audience again to board directors. What would you tell them?

A. If you haven't met your company's CHRO, I would suggest you reach out and set up a meeting. And it's not just about having them show up with survey data or insights in terms of compensation. It's about helping you understand the organizational health of the company. Are you acutely aware of the performance of the CEO and his or her respective reports? Do you have a plan for the exit and the on-boarding of any key leaders in the organization? And if you're not close enough to knowing that, then you clearly need to have more proximity.

A. I close every interview with the same question: If I were to reach out and speak to someone you work with, what are they going to tell me about you? It's an open-ended question, and is extremely telling of who the person is, how they think about leadership and how they think about their role. Then I'll always ask, what would they say is the thing that you should change the most about yourself? It goes back to self-awareness.

Q. And what about your own development as a leader? What has influenced you the most?

A. I have had a relentless work ethic since I was very young. I've always wanted to have an impact and work with others. It's always been about setting a vision, demonstrating that I'm going to work alongside people, and not asking someone to do anything that I wouldn't do myself or haven't done myself.

With me, what you see is what you get. I am very humble and I think that builds an approachability that makes it easy for me to build relationships with peers, because they don't see me as a competitive threat to anyone.

Q. Was it part of your early career plans to be a CHRO?

A. I was 25 years old when I decided that I wanted to run HR someday. I was in a career-development workshop at Rogers Communications, and they asked us to think about what we felt were our strengths and opportunities for development.

I realized I'd be happier having a vision and trying to get other people to follow along and work with me. You're always going to be part of a team, but I wanted to lead the team more than I wanted to just be a member of the team.

***Let's continue the conversation. Please share your feedback on Donna Morris's insights on how to be a strategic CHRO, and any observations from your own experience on best-in-class HR initiatives and strategies.***