



## Strategic CHRO: Susan Podlogar of MetLife on the "New Way of Working"

Published on July 30, 2018



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*For the next installment of my interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the CHRO, I sat down with Susan Podlogar, executive vice president and chief human resource officer at MetLife. She shared many smart insights about the changing nature of work and HR's role in accelerating strategy, as well as some memorable stories about her own leadership lessons. Stay tuned for more interviews in coming weeks with other leaders in the HR field.*

Q. How has the role of the CHRO changed?

A. In the past, strategic HR was about optimizing a process, like incentive plans or talent development plans. Now HR is expected to provide macro solutions rather than micro solutions. It's moving to optimizing the organization, not just a function or process, and moving to maximizing the productivity of the organization as an integrated whole.

That means addressing questions like, how do you maximize the man-machine interface in order to make the system work more effectively? I have to know the trends that are coming, where they're going to impact my organization, both financially and in terms of

technology. For example, I'm working with our Chief Technology Officer to identify where technology could augment our workforce.

One area we're exploring this is in our customer service group. We now have technology so that a Customer Service supervisor can tell, based on the length of pauses, the tone of voice, the words customers are using, whether that call is on track and if they need to support the call. It's not replacing the person who's handling the call, but it's augmenting their work.

Q. Are corporate leaders saying they need this kind of broader strategic input from HR or was it HR saying that companies need their input?

A. It's a little bit of both. Business leaders are better understanding the role of HR and people in differentiating organizational outcomes. In the past, leaders could operate in silos and achieve outcomes, but now optimal solutions come from networks. The problems that businesses are facing are becoming so complex that organizations have to come together much quicker to facilitate a solution. That's not how many business leaders have operated in the past, but that's a specialty HR can drive. This is the new way of working.

Q. Silo behavior is a problem for every big company. How do you provide a counterweight to that tendency of human beings to self-identify in small tribes?

A. You start with purpose. If you're aligned on what you're ultimately delivering for the customer and where you're delivering value, then people can say, "Okay, I can align to that." The second point is goal-setting. If you have integrated goal-setting versus functional goal-setting, then that breaks down barriers to focus the scorecard on how you're going to collectively win for the customer. And that establishes an emotional connection to the value we create for society.

Focus is the other key. The hardest thing for organizations is to focus on the three to four things that matter most, so there's clarity, there's performance orientation, results orientation. Of the three Ps that guide my actions as a CHRO -- purpose, potential and performance -- collaborative performance is driven through these integrated goals and being focused on the outcomes.

Q. Can you talk about the potential part?

A. My fundamental belief is that everybody has potential. We use the term "high potential" for development and career paths, but everyone has potential to contribute. I challenge my team and our leaders with the question: "How can we best bring out the

potential of the organization, and the potential of every individual who comes to work every day?" You have to really understand the strengths of each person, and how you bring out the best in them. That takes a lot more time and care as a leader. It is much harder than sending someone to a program for a high-potential group.

That comes from a very personal point of view. I'm the ninth child in my family, and my parents didn't look at their children in terms of "potential, high potential, no potential." They didn't have a grid for us. All the kids had potential. It was about putting us in the right roles and testing different activities in order to bring out the best of the gifts we had been given.

Q. I've interviewed a lot of leaders over the years who come from large families. What did you learn from being raised in that environment?

A. You learn a lot about leadership. You learn teamwork, competition, survival, alliances and communication. To me, life never revolved around any kind of hierarchy because, as the youngest, you can't wait until it's your turn. You speak up when you need to because you'd never be heard if you had to follow order or hierarchy. I believe it's why I'm very comfortable and can adapt to different situations.

Q. If a CHRO of another company called you for advice – they were not given the seat at the table they were promised at the outset – what advice would you give them?

A. First, understand where you can deliver value, and meet the organization where it is. I'll give you a small example. In one of my early jobs, I asked the leader, where can I add value? And he said, "You can help me write my performance reviews." And I thought, "Hmm, that's a pretty basic thing in terms of being able to add value." I could have said, "No, I am here to add strategic value to you. I'm not going to help you with your performance reviews."

But I believe you earn your way. So I helped with the performance reviews, and fast-forward to a year and a half later, that same leader called me every day for advice. It's about creating these small wins early to earn credibility and trust over time, and meeting the organization where it is rather than just expecting things because of your title.

Q. What questions should a CHRO ask the CEO before joining a new company?

A. How do you view HR? How has HR contributed to the organization? What have you valued the most from HR? If they're talking about small process wins versus strategic impact, that would tell you a lot. The other thing I would ask about is values alignment. Explore their personal values and organizational values, and ensure they are aligned

with your values.

Q. What are the X factors that separate the best CHROs from good CHROs?

A. One is a relentless focus on business outcomes, with a fundamental belief that people are truly the lever that can influence those outcomes. Second, an insatiable curiosity in terms of trends -- what's happening in our workforce, what's happening within your industry -- and how you bring all those together to have an impact on outcomes.

And the final one is probably a little underrated, but you have to be brave, because the answers are not out there. You have to be confident to move forward to say there are things that we should be doing to accelerate the strategy that may not have been done before. This last piece points to a future orientation, and continuing to push the boundaries of being relevant for the business in the future.

Q. What have been the most important leadership lessons you've learned in your career?

A. The most important lessons are around courage and career. First, for me, the biggest lesson is to be courageous, trust your gut, and don't hold back. There have been times when I had to meet with the CEO and the board and challenge some of the things that they were proposing. But I always felt fundamentally that it was my job to clearly and respectfully state my point of view. Getting comfortable with that is not easy, but I think that's a differentiator that people respect, especially in an organization that values diversity and appreciates people pushing the status quo.

Another lesson or perhaps advice came early in my working years, when my boss came up to me and said, "Susan, I have full confidence that you're going to do very well in your career. Measure your success by who you develop and what do they do and how they grow." As a result, as a leader, I will push people harder than maybe they are comfortable with, but I give them a safety net, just maybe a little bit lower than they're comfortable with, but it's still there.

The final lesson related to my own career is knowing what you want and not just letting your career happen. For years, I let my career happen. And then one day my new boss said to me, "So what do you want?" And I said, "I don't understand your question. I've always done what the company asked me to do." And he asked me again, "What do you want in your career?" It took me a week to respond to his question. Now I ask that question much more of developing talent.

It's complementary to one of my favorite job interview questions. I ask people, "What

energizes you?" I try to peel that back to then say, "What is your purpose? If you look at where you feel you contribute the most and where you've been most energized, where has it been?" I fundamentally believe that if you match individual purpose and energy with a business need, you get exponential performance. That's the ultimate in talent management.