



## Strategic CHRO: Amy Cappellanti-Wolf on Being the Office of "How," not "No."

Published on January 14, 2019

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*For the next installment of our interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the chief human resources officer, [David Reimer](#), the CEO of The ExCo Group, and I sat down recently with [Amy Cappellanti-Wolf](#) of Symantec. She shared smart smart insights with us about why CHROs should embrace the "commercial" label. Stay tuned for more interviews with other HR leaders.*

**Reimer: What does the phrase strategic CHRO mean to you?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: Let's start with what I don't think it is. You're not up in the clouds, working on ethereal things. You have to be very aware of what's happening in the business and be able to translate the business imperatives to what it means for HR and then create a plan to implement and operationalize them. Good, strategic HR is very business-minded, but it also has a results orientation to it, so you can really measure both business and people outcomes.

**Reimer: Sometimes there's a learning curve for the CEO about what they can expect from a CHRO who plays at that level. What has been your experience?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: I worked in consumer products, at Frito-Lay and Disney, before moving

into technology in 2000. Those companies were very leadership-driven and focused on developing change-management capabilities. When I first came to tech, I met a lot of brilliant leaders in terms of technology, but they were not particularly experienced in how to lead through change, how to motivate, how to inspire, and how to build a leadership bench.

It's been a journey for me to help teach people how to use HR. That has been humbling at times, because it meant being super tactical to show your value and what you could do to move the business. You have to find a way to meet them where they're at and then, once you build credibility through delivering on some of their initial expectations, then you show how you can help them in a much different way.

**Bryant: That is a big shift from consumer to tech. How was that experience for you?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: I had a couple of interviews where I was told, "You don't have a technology background." I had to say, "It doesn't matter. I'm smart and agile and can learn quickly." I had to prove myself, check my ego at the door, and show that I'm a lifelong learner who can get my hands dirty and connect with people who really get the business, so I could learn to speak their language.

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Once you begin to speak their language, they're more apt to bring you into these conversations, rather than seeing you as a corporate HR person who isn't really commercial. And commercial is the word I use often to describe myself, because I'm not about building policies or rules. I think rules can take away choices. I want to be the office of "how," not the office of "no."

**Bryant: If you were advising CEOs on the X-factors to look for when they are hiring a CHRO, what would top your list?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: I'd tell them to look for someone with strong data analytics skills and the ability to translate data into a story and into a solution. I want someone who's comfortable with data, because that's what the business expects, and who then can use it to predict and change the weather, not just forecast it.

The second thing to look for is EQ, because as the head of HR, you're in a lot of meetings and you have to have the ability to shift or call out certain dynamics, either in the moment or behind the scenes.

The last piece is, depending upon the size of the company, their ability to be agile, because the market changes so rapidly. I've seen some HR leaders come in to a new job and say, "Here's my playbook. This worked at my previous company, and I'm going to bring it to this company." That may have worked before, but it's not going to work here. They need to be able to pivot and show a track record of how they created new toolkits and approaches to adapt to changing circumstances.

**Reimer: Those meeting dynamics you mentioned can be fraught. How do you handle those tough situations?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: I try to use humor, and it's important to have strong relationships so that people are open to feedback. Also, I try to remain super present in the conversations, track what is being said and unsaid, and not get too caught up in the outcomes. People can get attached to a particular end point that they want to drive to, and they fail to see what's happening in the conversation or in the environment.

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For important meetings, I do a fair amount of noodling in advance about what we're trying to accomplish and considering potential perspectives in the room. Then I walk in prepared to listen and understand before I advocate.

**Reimer: How would you advise a board on the best way to truly understand the culture of their organization?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: It's a slippery slope because CEOs want the board to advise them; they don't want them to run their business. But there needs to be a way for boards to have access to information related to the product, customers and employees. Boards should expect regular reporting and discussions on pulse surveys from employees, alumni surveys that give you insights about why people are leaving, and retention rates for high performers. All those metrics will give them a sense of why people are staying and going.

On a quarterly basis, I report out to our board on our culture and our efforts related to diversity, equity and inclusion. That's critical. A board has to be asking for more of that information – not to armchair quarterback, but to have a good sense of what's working and what's not. Nobody wants to be surprised. I think some boards have been surprised when these ethical concerns or questions about a talent drain come up.

We are also going through a cultural transformation effort, so I'm walking our board through our plan to build the culture we want after all these acquisitions and how that relates to our business strategy. Having the business strategy clarified and aligned, and the cultural landscape in place to enable the business, will yield far greater success than hollow value statements on posters in the office corridors. You need to have facts and data for the conversation with the board.

**Bryant: When you look at your leadership pipeline, what are the skills that matter the most in the leaders you're developing?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: Agility is important because the security market's growing so rapidly. So it's someone who can stay current not only current in Horizon 1 but also really think about Horizon 2 and 3 because that's what's going to help shape the market and also shape what we do every day.

Leaders who are really strong in bringing others along with them in terms of change management is also another critical capability. The one thing that's remained current in this company since I've been here is change. And it's not change for the sake of change; it's real business transformation. You need leaders who can really help bring a group together, create a compelling platform for change, and orient the team to how they contribute to change. And these leaders need to encourage collaboration across traditional structural boundaries.

The last attribute is more related to some of the technical aspects of really understanding security in terms of cybersecurity and the domain we have here. You curate these skills over a long period of time. How do we build that capability faster -- both the soft skills and the hard skills related to cybersecurity?

**Reimer: Where does your personal drive come from?**

Cappellanti-Wolf: I grew up in a university town in West Virginia, in a close-knit middle-class family with really strong values. My dad owned his own restaurant, and he worked seven days a week. Our vacations were long weekends in Ocean City, Md., because that was far enough for us to get away but not so far that my father couldn't get back to the restaurant if he had to. So I learned early on about work ethic and humility. My dad always said, "Work hard, and good things will come your way." We all worked in the family, either in the restaurant or in jobs when we were going to college.

My mother was a stay-at-home mom, and she was always there as our mentor, our best advocate, telling us that we could do anything if we put our minds to it. I left West Virginia after grad school, because I always had this wanderlust to travel the world, explore, learn and grow. I like challenges, and I get bored if I'm not constantly challenged. I was the kid who always raised her hand to say, "I'll go do that messy thing," because that's how I felt I would learn and open myself up to new experiences instead of taking the safe route.