



Mary Humiston, former group director, global human resources, of Rolls Royce plc



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

Biweekly Series

Strategic CHRO: For Transformations, Start with Communicating the "Why"

Adam Bryant

For the next installment of our interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the chief human resources officer, I sat down recently with [Mary Humiston](#), former group director, global human resources at Rolls Royce PLC. She had many smart insights to share, including the importance of communicating to employees the rationale behind big strategic shifts, not just the details of the plans. Stay tuned for more interviews with other HR leaders.

Q. What have been some key lessons for you about being a strategic CHRO?

A. Partnering with the CFO has always been important. But today, you also have to have a partnership with the chief strategy officer, or whoever plays that role in your company. Without HR involved, discussions around strategy won't have the depth they deserve and people considerations won't have been fully considered. That's the only way to develop a true people strategy that takes into account the capabilities and capacities you need.

Q. To make that a reality, though, you need a CEO who wants their CHRO to be involved in those upstream conversations.

A. I've had different experiences on that front in my career. There are some who get it right away, and want you to contribute as much as you can. And others, for whatever reason, see HR in a different way. Sometimes they just don't know what HR can do. But you have to try different approaches.

"As a function, HR often tries vanilla, vanilla, vanilla, and then we get upset when it doesn't work." As a function, HR often tries vanilla, vanilla, vanilla, and then we get upset when it doesn't work. But you've got to try French vanilla and cherry vanilla. And maybe the board can help, because they will

have had experiences where they've seen the full value of HR, and can ask the CEO about people strategies and HR's role in important discussions.

Q. What's your advice to a CHRO who's on the market and wants to make sure the company they're joining is a good fit?

A. The past is a pretty good indicator, so part of it is asking the CEO about the experiences they've had with HR, so you can determine if their previous CHRO was really part of the team. You can also ask about the people strategy, and for their opinions about things that were working particularly well and what they are personally leading for. If the depth isn't there, you'll know pretty quickly after two or three clicks into the conversation. You can figure out pretty quickly if they just want somebody to mind the store.

Q. If you were talking to a room full of 100 newly minted CHROs, what advice would you share with them?

A. You have to really manage the relationships with your CEO and your peers – get to know them and what they need and expect, and then be sure to deliver on it. People often spend a lot of time managing up and managing down, but they are terrible with peer relationships. But those are key. When I was involved in a transformation, I was focused on the CEO and my team, and I wasn't bringing my peers along with me as much as I could have. That's missed value.

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The other thing I would say to them is that it would be really smart to have a game plan for developing your own digital savviness and acumen about your industry and the business world in general, not just for the HR function. That way, you can really partner with helping your company understand the gaps and the opportunities. In HR, we often are so busy focused on everyone else that we don't give ourselves the oxygen mask first. Having your own learning plan and getting after it is really important.

Q. And what would you say to an audience of new CEOs about how they can best work with their CHRO?

A. They have to be honest with themselves. Is their CHRO strong, and helping the team to chart a course and execute their strategy? And if not, why not? It could be that they've never seen what this looks like when it's done well. It could be that they don't think that their person has the ability to do it. But the CEO should see the CHRO as their consigliere and their most trusted ally.

Building that trusting relationship takes time, but also the CHRO shouldn't be sitting back and waiting for the invitation. I would facilitate a sharing of insights of the impact that that kind of relationship can have when it's done well. Hearing from their peer CEOs can have great influence.

Q. For companies trying to pull off a cultural transformation, what are the most important levers you have to pull to make sure you're bringing everyone along?

A. Transformations are never going to stop. It's just a new way of living and breathing and working. One key is having employees' voice included in shaping and sharing that new vision so that people feel empowered and engaged in the destiny of the company, and they can see how their own role is aligned the company's overall goals. To pull that off, it takes a bit of time to really connect everything. It's critical to start with why we are doing this. We mostly start with what, when and how, but the why is the reason people follow.

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I also think the whole idea of career-related support – or career enablement, as I call it – needs a whole rethink. Some people still think someone's going to tap them on the shoulder and show them a path that's straight up. That all has to be refreshed to fully empower everyone to navigate their own path and convey the message, "You're in the driver's seat. Your manager has a big role to help and support you and the company is going to help you. But you have to learn and grow all the time and take the lead."

Q. What were some important influences for you early in your life?

A. Early on, I was surrounded by people who just were supportive and positive, and the kind of people who tell you that you can do what you want to do, which is really important. I've had lots of experiences that have taught me that I'm resilient, I can try different things, and I can navigate different situations to get things done.

On the side, I'm starting up a pop-up retail concept for emerging artists in upstate New York I like to initiate and be an entrepreneur, as well as being part of a team. I like to stretch the boundaries of what I or others think is possible. I love to create things and see them have impact.

Q. What have been some key leadership lessons for you over the years?

A. There is nothing quite like getting a team aligned around a common goal, and everyone feels it and looks forward to coming to work and you're all connected. I've had moments when I was able to build my team from scratch. I had the time of my life. When you have those moments, it's just incredible. And if you trust your team, you can really, deeply empower them, and it just blows me away what people will come up with. I've also always had a really good sense of people's potential, and I have really pushed and pulled some people hard throughout my career. Again, it's unbelievable what people can do.

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