Strategic CHRO: Sony's Mike LaBianca on the Power of Passion and Curiosity

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For the next installment of our interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the chief human resource officer, David Reimer, the CEO of Merryck & Co. Americas, and I sat down recently with Mike LaBianca, senior vice president and global head of human resources for Sony Interactive Entertainment - PlayStation. His insights and perspectives offer a master class on how to earn a seat at the table. Be sure to read to the end for his unforgettable metaphor about how CHROs should see their role. Stay tuned for more interviews with other HR leaders.

Reimer: Your experience in HR goes deep, including senior roles at Nvidia and Cisco before you came to Sony. What does the "strategic CHRO" label mean to you?

LaBianca: When I attend conferences, a lot of the conversations focus on the idea that if the business doesn't accept you as a strategic leader, then it's their problem. People say that you shouldn't go to a company that doesn't accept HR as a strategic differentiator. But I think the opposite is true. You have to prove your chops in order to have a seat at the table and to be strategic.

The most important thing for an HR leader to do to become strategic is to be really curious. You have to be interested in the business that you're going into. You can't be a dilettante and not know anything about it or not be interested in it. It helps if you're passionate about it.

What sparks an interest in the rest of the executive team is that they will recognize that you're passionate. You're listening and you're open to learning. I think you have to spend the first six months to a year making sure that you make it to every single meeting and making as many connections as you can. You're learning about what's going on with the business, what the

struggles are of each of the different operating groups. That way, you complete the picture for yourself of what's really going on.

The biggest mistake HR folks make is they jump in too early. They reach these conclusions about what needs to be fixed and what doesn't need to be fixed before they really have the full picture. And the full picture rarely emerges within the first 90 days because people have to get comfortable with you. You have to begin to tease out some of the nuances of what's going on. You have to build the foundation of the HR function but at the same time you're kind of running along the ridge line and making sure that you're immersed and steeped in what's going on in the company.

Then, at that point, you can begin to shift or add to some of the offerings that you have in order to accelerate the company's strategy. You can derail yourself by thinking that being strategic means coming up with an idea each day or week. There are plenty of ideas out there and there are all kinds of cool things to do. But you have to put them on a grid and say, "Which of these neat, new things can help amplify the culture? What's the timeline for it to take traction? Is it going to conflict with another initiative?" You have to do a little bit of air traffic control on that.

Bryant: Culture is a big, amorphous word. What do you think has the biggest impact on culture?

LaBianca: For leaders, you have to walk the talk. You can talk about all sorts of cultural initiatives, but if you don't see the leader actually putting those into practice, it actually hinders the development of a culture rather than helps it.

I started my career at Hewlett Packard, and probably the most impactful moment of my career was meeting Dave Packard for the first time. I think he was the chairman at the time. I had only been there five weeks, and I was in accounting. I went to give a report to his secretary, who was away from his desk. He came out and said, "Can I help you?" And I said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Packard. I didn't mean to disturb you." And he said, "Nonsense. Show it to me."

He looked at me, put his arm around me, and said, "You know, I want to thank you for deciding to invest your career with us. It's very important that we have people out of college who believe in our mission, believe in what we're doing. You're going to be what makes HP great." It had a very meaningful effect on me. He continued to believe in taking the time to get to know every employee the moment that he could and expressing his support and thanks. That's the most powerful cultural moment that I've ever experienced anywhere.

Reimer: If somebody in Silicon Valley were considering CHRO job offers from a number of different companies, what advice would you give them to help them choose?

LaBianca: You start by looking at the composition of the board and whether the board is comprised of presidents of other public companies who have been successful. There are plenty of boards that are filled with folks who are investors rather than presidents of public companies. But presidents of public companies have a lot of experience and they've succeeded with certain initiatives. They've failed with others. Many of them will have seen strategic HR. Some of them will have seen terrible HR. So that kind of collective wisdom is what you hope to get from a board.

Then you'd want to find out what's happened with HR at the company before, and really do your due diligence. What haven't they done before? What's really going on?

Third, does HR report to the president or is it reporting to the CFO or the COO? A company is like a basketball team. Everybody is playing their part, and a well-run company needs a strong CFO who is constantly evaluating costs. But then the team equally needs a strong CHRO who is concerned about costs, as well, but is concerned about the business of HR first and foremost. Then the president needs to be the one to balance those considerations. The minute you put HR under the COO or the CFO, cost ends up being kind of the key driver. It's an important consideration, but there needs to be a kind of point-counterpoint.

Bryant: The CHRO plays an interesting role on the executive team. You're part of the team, but you also have to be seen as the honest broker for the team. How do you do that?

LaBianca: It's about making yourself accessible to all the leaders equally. The way I make that work is I don't insist on a one-on-one with all the leaders every two weeks. It turns out that I have a one-on-one with most of the leaders every two weeks because they want to do that. So

I'm always available for them.

For the ones who are busy or they're just not one-on-one type of folks, I make an effort to have lunch with them every two months or so. I try to find out the pain points that they have with HR and try to coax it out of them in a non-judgmental way – what do you need me to help you with? Then I make sure we get those things fixed. That then leads to other conversations about what else is going on in their part of the business.

Reimer: What's your role in helping operators who are trying to deliver on this quarter's numbers to also think about long-term strategy?

LaBianca: That's a really important part of the job. It's a little bit like being in the Oval Office and being an advisor to the president. You may have developed a strategy, but no one will ever know it was you. And if they do know, then you've failed in your job. You have to have a point of view and be willing to discuss your point of view. Companies decide on their strategy based on a number of people influencing a lot of those conversations.

For me, that's the part of the job that I find intensely interesting and satisfying because I learn a lot. As much as I'm sharing my thoughts and trying to influence, I'm hearing all the reasons why half the ideas I have won't work. Then I can iterate my idea.

When you're in HR and being that strategic person, you're a little bit like a bee. You have a platform to go from leader to leader and kind of pollinate and germinate. And if you're really learning from everyone, you're making the company better and better.

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