



Karen Wheeler, chief human resources officer of SAIC



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

Do All Your Communications to Employees Pass the "Simple Test?"

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Chief human resources officers tend to fall into one of two

*campus: they have deep experience in HR, or they make a sharp career pivot, asked by top leaders to move from another part of the company to bring their fresh eyes to the role. **Karen Wheeler** of SAIC is in the latter group, and in our conversation, she shared how her outsider's perspective helped provide clarity and focus to the work of her team.*

Q. How did you get into HR?

A. I started out working summers in college at a defense contractor, and worked for a couple of contracting firms before I came to SAIC about 24 years ago. I was named chief of procurement in 2013. I moved into the CHRO role about three years ago.

Q. How did that shift come about?

A. It was a little out of the blue, but at the time they were looking for a different perspective and a different leadership style in the department. The organization had been heading in a direction where the business was moving one way and HR was focusing on more traditional HR things.

They wanted HR to be more tied into the strategy. That's the challenge that was presented to me. I have an ability to pull threads a little bit easier because I've been in different departments. Given all those different perspectives, they thought maybe I could bring a different lens to the role.

Q. What was your playbook for the first 90 days?

A. My big goal was to figure things out, because it is definitely more difficult when you don't have the lingo and background of HR to understand the nuances. It was eye-opening to get a sense of what some of these things mean, and what it is we're trying to accomplish.

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In one meeting, I brought in the entire staff of about 20 people and I asked everybody to get up and say what they were working on. We called it the bucket list. They had to go through their entire bucket list and tell me what they were doing, and we sat there for an entire day to figure out why they were doing that and who was the customer they were serving. Is it the business, the strategy?

We were a little bit of a department that just took things on, rather than saying, "Why do you need this project, report, or data? What are you trying to accomplish?" Because we may have something already in hand that can provide them a different lens.

Q. That exercise must have been time-consuming, but I can see how it gave you a clearer picture of what was going on.

A. There were some disconnects. People would say they were spending all day trying to figure out a particular data point, and I would ask, why? It turned out it was going to be a number in a government RFP, and I walked them through how a contracting officer was going to look at that number. The light bulb went on for them because they realized they spent days on something that didn't warrant that much time.

I introduced a lot of principles to the organization. One is that things have to pass the "simple test," because I'll be the first person to look at an HR policy and say, "I have no idea what you guys just wrote."

I'm representing the consumer. We can't send benefits packages to employees that are nine pages long, so let's think about how to do it differently. They laugh about it now. They'll say, "We did the Karen Wheeler simple test and it is not passing the test." Those kinds of things help.

Q. What's your dashboard for providing insights to the board about culture?

A. It isn't so much what the metrics are; it's what they are telling you as they relate to your culture. If, say, we had a turnover rate that's higher for early career people, what does that mean? Is it that we are not paying them right or is the work not seen as interesting or dynamic compared to what their peers are doing at Google or some other company?

It's about making sure you have the metrics and understanding

precisely the foundation of them — what they mean and the message we're taking from them. There may be a day, for example, when we see that turnover's high in a certain part of our business, but maybe we need it in that area.

Q. If a first-time CHRO were to call you for suggestions on really owning the role. What's your top advice?

A. Make yourself relevant. In the past, HR was often viewed as a back-office function. People would roll their eyes and say, "We have to go to HR about this." I've heard the joke many times that HR stands for, "Huh, really?" It's about finding the way to be relevant to the conversation at the right place and the right time. HR has strategic levers that we can pull to really help build and shape the workforce and how they engage in the culture relative to where the company's headed.

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Also, don't let your emotions get the best of you. I've never had a job before this one where I was truly rendered speechless. It wasn't because of what an employee did; it was what they were going through. I couldn't say a single word to them that would make anything better, given the totality of their circumstances.

Those are the times when you somehow have to find a way to step back

and approach it with more of a doctor-patient mindset – I love my patient, but you’re my patient. There can be a perception that HR only supports the manager or only supports the employee. It’s about finding that balance, especially when you’re dealing with hard issues.

Q. Let’s shift to your earlier years. Were you in leadership roles when you were younger?

A. My parents always said that I was feisty and that I needed to go to law school, which I did at night when I worked here. But yes, I was definitely a leader, not a follower, early on. In elementary school, I ran for student government president. If I was on a team and I didn’t like the way the work was being done, I would say to myself, “I should lead this.” It was the same through college. I was the sorority president and in student government.

I really like building the team to rally behind something. I can bring all the different personalities together. If you’re an introvert, I can reach out to you if you’re feeling like you’re not getting the support you need. I’m able to see that dynamic, and I like it and I thrive on it. I really want to get the team working together and everybody succeeding.

Q. What’s been a key leadership lesson that you’ve learned over your career?

A. Never let a problem get so bad that it impacts other people, particularly if an employee is not performing. I had one person who

was in a torrid relationship and spent hours on the phone and wasn't performing and it was getting worse. One night I was sitting in my office and I walked out and two of my people were still there, and I said, "What are you guys doing?" They told me they were doing all of his work, because he had not done it.

I realized I had failed to manage the problem. You have to follow your gut instincts. My instincts told me this was a bad situation, and I learned the hard way when it got really bad because the whole team was paying a price for it.

Q. What do you find to be the hardest aspect of leadership?

A. When you have to rally behind something you just don't agree with and you've got to make it look like you do. To me, the sign of a good leader is that they don't wear that on their sleeve, and they're able to say to themselves, "We've decided to go in X direction or do Y, and I don't love it but you're never going to know I don't love it because they've asked me to lead. I had to align." That one's hard.