



Kirsten Marriner, Chief People Officer of Clorox



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

In the C-Suite, "You Have To Do This Job Like You Have Nothing To Lose."

Published on October 14, 2019



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*Nobody hands chief human resources officers a detailed playbook on how to do the job; they have to write the playbook themselves. **Kirsten Marriner**, the chief people officer at Clorox, shared her insightful frameworks for the role in a conversation with me and my colleague **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

Reimer: How did you get into HR? Were there early signs of an interest in the field when you were young?

Marriner: No, when I was a teenager, I thought I would work for the FBI. As a kid, I read a lot — Nancy Drew, Hardy Boys, Alfred Hitchcock, and any mystery I could get my hands on. I moved on to true crime, and I just thought the FBI would be fascinating.

Then I went to college and I took a psych 101 class that captivated me. I continued down the psych path, and in my junior year, I got practical about getting a job. There was this new field called industrial organizational psychology, which was psychology, business, and communications, and it wrapped up into HR.

At the end of my junior year, I joined the school chapter of the Society for HR Management. Two months later, they held elections for the following year. I ran for president and I won, so I became deeply involved in that role and got connected with people in the local business community.

Reimer: How do you think about shaping your current role? What

is your playbook?

Marriner: I don't see myself as an HR person. I am a business person who happens to know a thing or two about HR. That's how I approach it – how you equip yourself with knowledge, your skills, how you spend your time, how you frame questions, how you think about opportunities, how you think about what you're here to do. It's about being clear on the purpose of your HR organization, in service of the broader business objectives.

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second."*

So I wear an enterprise hat first, and I wear a functional hat second. For the functional hat, I focus on what the business needs from us. Where are we trying to take the business, and then how do we play in that? It's about helping drive business outcomes.

Bryant: If I were a CEO who wanted to hire a CHRO who thinks strategically, what questions should I ask in an interview?

Marriner: Don't ask about HR; start with business questions. If I think about my second interview with our CEO, Benno Dorer – and I was interviewing for a role in a CPG company, having never worked in one before — he asked me what I had learned about the business and the company since our first interview.

I shared some things, and they were all business-related. I talked about the changing retailer and consumer dynamics, and he drilled and drilled and drilled to make sure that it was not surface knowledge and that I had worked to learn the business.

The second approach for a CEO interviewing a CHRO candidate would be to ask, “If these are the business outcomes we’re trying to drive as a company, talk to me about when you’ve helped drive those kinds of outcomes before and how you did it.” It’s about thinking of the organization as a system, and everything has to work together.

Bryant: If you flipped that example around, what advice would you give to a CHRO who was interviewing with a CEO to make sure the company really wanted a strategic HR executive?

Marriner: I’m a big believer in behavior-based interviewing, so I would ask, “What does a strategic CHRO mean to you? What are you looking for? Tell me about when you’ve experienced that and why it’s been effective. Tell me about when you haven’t experienced it and what has been missing.”

Trust is also critical, particularly between the CEO and the CHRO. In one conversation with Benno, I had a sea of questions that I would have liked to ask, but we had five minutes left in that particular interview. So I asked, “What does it mean to you to have a trusting relationship? What does that look like? In what ways has that manifested for you in the past? How would that work for us?” It was a really good dialogue and I felt confident that we’d work well together.

Reimer: What are the right answers to that question for you?

Marriner: One is transparency. And two is the expectation of, and commitment to, complete candor. I have to be able to tell him what I think and I have to be able to tell him when I disagree with how he is thinking, or what he's doing, or something he has done. Equally important, I need to know that he will tell me what's on his mind, no matter what the topic or issue.

I often say in this role, and it's true for other C suite-roles, that you have to do the job like you have nothing to lose. If you do the job that way, you're always going to be right down the middle of the fairway. In prior roles, I've had to push back on things that were just not right. Do the right thing is one of our core values at Clorox. It's one of the reasons I'm here.

Reimer: What is your framework for thinking about culture in the context of driving the strategy?

Marriner: Culture is only important in service of the business outcomes that we're trying to drive. It's really important to be clear about the culture we're aiming for, and to double click or triple click on them because people sometimes don't really understand what they mean, or they're not all in agreement, or they're not willing to make the tradeoffs that are required to deliver on that desired culture.

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That starts with an honest assessment of where we are. It does not matter if it's good or bad, reality is where we start because only then do we know what we should do to get from here to there. So what's our reality, and what are the most important change vectors? You can't boil the ocean, so what are the few most important things that we can impact? And then work to change them.

I also watch out for goals that are mutually exclusive, which I've seen over the years. People will say, "I want this and I want that." Sometimes we can find a way to make it happen and thread the needle, and sometimes we can't. If it's literally not possible – if we want things that are mutually exclusive – then we need to acknowledge that upfront so that we can get alignment on the priorities.

For example, in order to drive growth through innovation, you have to be willing to make some mistakes and you have to be willing to fail as long as there is a lesson learned. So you can't say that we want innovation, but that you aren't willing to allow people to fail. Those can't coexist.

Bryant: You've mentioned values that are important to you, like candor, trust and pulling no punches. Where does that come from?

Marriner: I'm the first-born with a younger sister, and I fit the research on first-borns. I also grew up in a dysfunctional family. My father was an alcoholic and my mother was co-dependent, so I was often the adult in the family really early on. Even then, I set a high standard for myself. All that was very formative. I can't tell you exactly where the values come from but I have a very strong compass about what's okay and what's not okay.

As an example, early in my career I would have never thought to ask questions about integrity during an interview. Then I worked in a place where I saw things that were just not okay with me, and I left a job in a company that I really loved because of that. I realized that it's a filter I need to apply now and that I can't take integrity for granted.

Reimer: If you were hosting a dinner party for CHROs and wanted to spark a lively conversation about an issue that they are all wrestling with, what would it be?

Marriner: I think the issue of our time is inclusion and diversity. We will always, always, always have to work on it. There is not one right answer. There is not a silver bullet. It is one of the most complex things that we deal with, and it is such an important part of the employee experience and the human experience.

And it's becoming more important as you think about the changing generations. When I think of my kids, they don't see the differences that other generations see, and they certainly don't judge people the way others do. Expectations are different as workforce dynamics

change. The bar will keep moving, and it's not a straightforward solve. As complex as it is, though, I'm optimistic. There's never been more focus or passion directed at making genuine progress.