



Dawn Rogers, chief human resources officer, Pfizer



**Strategic CHRO**

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# "We Have to Create Space for People to Think, Act and Work Differently."

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*A powerful theme that emerged from our conversation with **Dawn Rogers**, the chief human resources officer at Pfizer, is the importance of prioritization and simplification. She shared many smart insights with me and **David Reimer**, my colleague and our CEO at **The ExCo Group**, a senior leadership development firm.*

**Reimer: You've been in your first CHRO role for a year now. Has it played out as you expected?**

Rogers: I've had the unique experience of transitioning to this role during a CEO transition. I worked with our CEO when he was COO and preparing to become CEO, so I had an idea as to what his platform was going to be and where he was going to focus. It offered up an opportunity to really help shape the direction that he wanted to go. We're really focused on building the right culture for the people who work for us.

But one of the things that did take me by surprise was that even though I've been at Pfizer for 20 years and have been in senior roles for the last ten years, I still felt very unprepared for this job.

This was mostly because this role rarely allows you to go too deep into anything, and if you're going to go deep, you've really got to plan carefully, you've got to focus, and you also have to try to keep in mind how you build things from the center so that they can be helpful to the 80,000-plus people who work for us in 87 markets, whether they are senior leaders, sales reps or people on the manufacturing line.

**Reimer: There's an interesting tension in what you said, in that you have a lot of history with Pfizer, and yet the company has to keep evolving. How do you think about managing that?**

Rogers: One key is that we've just launched a new set of values and behaviors – Courage, Excellence, Equity, and Joy – as part of our our Purpose Blueprint, which is our strategic roadmap. I think this helps lay out where we are going in the future. For example, one of the Excellence behaviors we talk about is to focus on what matters, the things that are going to make the greatest difference.

For somebody like me who's built a career out of operational excellence and being able to deliver on every detail, it means getting comfortable walking away from some of the details. And to do that, you have to have the right people in place on your team to do all the things you can't focus on.

*"You've really got to choose the places where you're going to go deep."*

You've really got to choose the places where you're going to go deep. As part of that, we've started a big simplification effort. We've grown in recent decades mostly through mergers and acquisitions. We've ended up with a company of layers on top of layers and taken away virtually nothing. We've created a tremendous amount of complexity.

And if we're going to achieve our Purpose – breakthroughs that change patients' lives, we're going to need to clear the path. Finding ways to simplify the things that we're doing – not just inside HR, but across our entire business – is a key area that we've doubled down on here.

In thinking about the way that our business has to change, we have to create space for people to think, act and work differently. Pfizer's work ethic is legendary. People here are proud of working long hours. That's hard for us to step back from, but we're focusing much more on working smarter. Focus on what matters, agree on who does what, and then measure outcomes. People really need to work in a more efficient way so that they can free up time to think. These are tough behaviors to change.

**Bryant: I imagine that can be hard, given everything you're responsible for as CHRO.**

Rogers: Our CEO really pushes us to focus on the things that are going to be important. So over the last year, I've learned to say no to some things so that I can focus on what we've agreed is going to move the needle.

I spent the first eight months of this job feeling like I was failing utterly because I was working 60-hour weeks and then some, and I still felt like I was never catching up and that I was walking into every meeting unprepared. I built a career on being able to deliver results, and suddenly I was in this job and I was struggling every day to deliver. Finally, I asked myself, how do I prioritize?

I landed on three priorities that were our CEO's and three priorities for the function that were mine, and that was it. For everything else, I basically said to the team, this belongs to you. It was hard to make that transition.

**Bryant: What's an example of something you've really had to make an effort to prioritize?**

Rogers: One of the things that's become important for me, and that I try to keep front and center for the rest of the leadership team, is to maintain a tight connection to understanding what's really happening in our business. I've told leaders that the higher up in the organization you go, the bigger the gap between what you think is going on and what's really going on. These jobs can become very isolating. Every time I'm out in our markets, I learn something new.

It takes a real effort, but it is so worth it. It informs everything you do because it gives you real data points. I think the days of the 80-question, once-a-year employee surveys will quickly be behind us. What you want is real-time information.

*"People have to see the company is showing real and valid interest in them."*

You want to be able to test messages and whether they're being received the way you intended. We need to use more contemporary

digital survey tools to get a constant pulse of feedback. People have to see the company is showing real and valid interest in them, and that what they're telling you is informing things that are happening.

**Reimer: One theme that has come up often in our conversations with CHROs is that you play a unique role on the leadership team. How do you think about that?**

Rogers: The only way you can be good at these jobs is if you deeply understand the business and have a curiosity about how it works, because that's the only way that you can understand the implications of your decisions. It's the only way you can work in that strategic space alongside leaders and bring real value. You've got to know what levers to pull that are going to have the right business outcomes.

That said, there are still times when I get stumped, and one of the pieces of advice I would give anybody in this role is find two best friends on the team – you need one who thinks a lot like you do and can help you refine your ideas, and you need one who thinks nothing like you do.

But there is a balance that has to be struck being on the executive leadership team, because you actually play a dual role. Your job is not just to contribute from an HR perspective, it's also to make that leadership team as effective as it can be. You're the person who's putting the tough things on the table, trying to remind people where we really are rather than where we'd like to believe we are, and the perception of the team in the minds of our 80,000-plus people.

**Reimer: Let's shift to you personally. What were some important early influences for you?**

Rogers: I grew up in a small town in Pennsylvania in a single-parent household. My mom was amazing. She was a secretary, and she raised three kids by herself and many times worked two jobs. She set the expectation for us that you can do anything you want to do. You've got to work hard for it, and you've got to lay out a plan. When I was in high school, there wasn't money put aside for college, so if I wanted to go I had to figure it out – and I did.

I went to community college before I transferred to a four-year school, and I worked all the way through. My mother's expectations had a tremendous positive impact on me. The idea that growing up in a single-parent household can be a plus is something that you're not going to read about all that often, but it very much was for me.

It taught me resilience. One of the pieces of advice my mother gave me a long time ago was that good things are going to happen for you and bad things are going to happen to you, and the way you manage the bad things is what's going to define your life. You've got to pick yourself up and get back in the game.