



Deborah Borg, Chief HR and Communications Officer, Bunge



## Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "You Can't Put Yourself in a Box of 'HR Does This.' There are Blurry Edges."

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*Deborah Borg's* willingness to raise her hand to take on new

*responsibilities has led to a rich and varied career path, toggling back and forth between HR roles and those with P&L responsibilities. She's also the chief communications officer, as well as the CHRO, at Bunge. She shared smart insights about how she approaches her HR role.*

**Q. How did you get into the field of HR?**

A. I thought I wanted to be a lawyer, but I was encouraged to get into HR by one of my high school teachers. I was very interested in business, but I didn't really know what my focus should be. So he said, "With your passion for law and communications, you should think about HR as a career." That was how I heard about HR in the first place.

**Q. You've been a CHRO for four years now. What have you learned since being in the role?**

A. My time here has involved a lot of restructuring for the organization, with a new CEO and a much more global path for the company. I've spent a much greater amount of time than I would have expected with the C-suite and the board, so I've learned to really narrow in on the areas where I absolutely need to be engaged.

I spend a lot less time running the mechanics of the function, but I have set the agenda for my team about the few things that we're really going to focus on in terms of driving the organization. We had quite an operational agenda when I first came in, including setting the

foundation for a more globally oriented organization. That meant resetting talent standards, and establishing a common, global language for the business around how we think about people and talk about people, in terms of the skills we need to build for the future.

**Q. What have been your insights about how to work the board effectively?**

A. Establishing your own relationships with the board is really important. It's an interesting dynamic, because you're representing the organization. You have an obligation to the CEO, but you also have an obligation to the board to share with them things that are going on in the organization.

*"As with any C-suite role, these jobs are pretty lonely."*

I use the board as a sounding board because, as with any C-suite role, these jobs are pretty lonely. So I take advantage of the diverse experiences and expertise of the board members. There's a few people I speak with on a regular basis, either for advice or to share updates on what's going on in the organization, as we're going through a lot of change. It's about informing them in a more conversational and less regimented way. It's relationship management at its finest, and not unlike the consiglieri role you play with the CEO and the executive team.

**Q. Talk more about that – the CHRO does play an unusual role on the executive team.**

A. It is an interesting role. We've had 70 percent of our executive team change in the last six months since our new CEO, Greg Heckman, came on, so I'm working with Greg to help shape the agenda for our meetings. What do we need to hear their voices on? How do we position the right topics so that we get collaborative thinking around this topic?

We're really setting up the team to want to engage with one another and build relationships. So I am facilitating many of the discussions, but there are also moments when it's important for me to be just a member of the team and not facilitate, so I can share my point of view as a general leader in the organization.

There's also a challenge in this role to make sure you're bringing to the forefront the HR agenda you feel is needed to position the business for success – whether it's about compensation design or thinking about capabilities in a different way – rather than just responding to the day-to-day aspects of HR.

It took me a while to realize that you need to be pretty thoughtful about bringing that to the business agenda and ensure you build the awareness and alignment around what is being worked on in HR to drive the business forward.

**Q. One unusual aspect of your background is that you've gone**

**back and forth between P&L line roles and HR. How has that experience made you a better CHRO?**

A. I've spent most of my career in HR, but I've had a couple of opportunities in P&L roles, which have been great. Knowing what keeps business leaders up at night helps me contribute as much to the P&L discussion as I do to the human dimensions of the business.

In my early days at General Motors, I had the opportunity to be a production supervisor in a car plant for six weeks. That may sound weird and random, but I raised my hand for it. Somebody was going on a six-week leave, and we didn't have another solution, so I said, "I'll run the production line."

It's important not to have a foregone conclusion around career paths and be open to experiences. In the HR space, you're mostly focused internally on the people in the business, so I appreciated those P&L roles and the opportunity to be more externally focused, working with customers and suppliers.

**Q. If you were speaking to a room full of directors and advising them on how to get a feel for what's happening inside their company, what would you tell them?**

A. I'm a director of a publicly traded company, as well, so I see it from both sides. Some of the more instructive things from a director perspective are around regular discussions on succession and capability building. They spend a lot of time on strategy and operations, so there's

a lot of insight to be gained from discussions around the capabilities we think we need and how strong the bench is from that standpoint.

You also have a lot of information in the HR space that can give you a feel for the culture, such as the pulse surveys that we do on a regular basis. We also share the results of our global ethics and compliance hotline. What are the nature of questions coming in? And we inform our board about involuntary separations – where are they taking place and what’s driving them – and exit-interview survey data.

**Q. What were early influences for you? Where does your drive come from?**

A. The biggest influence for me is being a child of immigrant parents. My parents immigrated from Malta, a little country in the Mediterranean Sea, which instills in you a determination to achieve something. We moved to Australia because they thought they could give us a better life.

*"There is no job I won't think about doing."*

That drive, that work ethic, that scrappiness of immigrants, means you will do whatever job comes your way. There is no job I won't think about doing. Why not? That sense of opportunity and not necessarily having a defined path certainly informs my day-to-day.

For example, I took on the chief communications officer role here, as well, because I felt that there was a gap in the organization. I was missing a bit of the external focus, so I said, “Look, I’ll do it. Let me run Comms.” There’s a synergy there with HR, as well, especially in terms of internal communications.

You can’t put yourself in the box of “HR does this.” There are blurry edges around where it starts and stops. You are strategists and you can be a visionary, and you have a point of view about where the business can go. You need to make sure that voice is heard, as well.