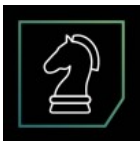




Tanuj Kapilashrami, Group Head, HR, Standard Chartered Bank



## Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "The Differentiated Leaders Are Those Who Are Able To Manage Ambiguity."

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*In my conversation with **Tanuj Kapilashrami**, group head of HR at Standard Chartered Bank, she shared smart insights*

*about how the crisis has been a catalyst for changing the conversation around which leadership qualities matter most.*

**Q. What lessons have you learned from the pandemic that will affect how you lead in the future?**

A. This crisis will be remembered as a humanitarian crisis of a scale that we perhaps will never see in our lifetimes again. The companies that will come out of it strongest are companies that have a really differentiated culture and a very clear sense of purpose to unify your workforce, your clients, your partners and stakeholders. The financial crisis of 2008 relied on CFOs to help their companies, but the companies that will come out stronger from this crisis will be those that have a strong HR function.

The second thing is that the days of macho leaders are absolutely over. The leaders I see who are coping best with this crisis are those who have a level of vulnerability. That has been considered an undesirable trait for too long in the corporate world. It's about having not just vulnerability, but also empathy, creativity and an acceptance of the fact that we don't have all the answers. The emergence of vulnerable leadership is a great gift and something that HR professionals will have to really think about as we groom the next generation of leaders.

*"The emergence of vulnerable leadership is a great gift."*

We also are seeing that great ideas are not just happening in corporate centers or big tech firms. The day-to-day innovation and creativity from our workforce is amazing. After this crisis started, somebody noted that we have many colleagues who suffer from disabilities and asked, how are we going to support them? A junior employee volunteered to do a virtual assessment of their workplaces and arrange for delivery of office equipment to their homes.

To build great companies, we need to democratize creativity and innovation and move away from rules-based or principle-based cultures so we can really unleash the resourcefulness and creativity and innovation that people can contribute. The more we are able to do that, the more likely it is that we'll be able to come out of this crisis much stronger.

**Q. How else are you thinking about leadership qualities in a new light?**

A. We had done work a year ago on the question of, what are the leadership skills we need for the future? Some were pretty obvious — you need to be a good communicator and to be able to translate strategy into action — but the No. 1 trait that emerged from our research was managing ambiguity.

And what we're seeing now is that the differentiated leaders are those who are able to manage ambiguity. We're not going to have all the answers, but how do I navigate through that ambiguity? These aren't words in a textbook anymore; these are real challenges that are playing

out every day.

**Q. What is the long-term impact on HR and the way we work?**

A. My view is that this crisis will fundamentally change the future of work, worker and workplace, which speaks to the interplay of technology, physical location and the kind of people we employ.

People are going to want very different choices in terms of their workplace and the way they work, and there will be a massive reimagining of what workplaces look like and how work gets done, with implications for traditional face-to-face meetings and business travel.

The issue of well-being will become a bigger priority for companies, now that this crisis has brought into sharp relief the issues of mental health and the pressures we face. We've long thought of well-being in terms of benefits like after-office yoga sessions, but well-being is going to become a core proposition of how we think about resilience, productivity and inclusion.

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The third thing is that it's going to accelerate a re-skilling and up-skilling agenda. There is a greater focus on technical skills around

digital, data, and technology, but they have to be balanced with human skills around ambiguity and embracing inclusion.

**Q. What are the biggest lessons you've learned about the CHRO role?**

A. First and foremost, you have to ask yourself why you want the job. I know it sounds basic, but what kind of an HR function do you want to run and who do you want to run the HR function for? What's your inner sense of purpose? The interaction with the CEO and the board are important, but I tell my team every day that we are delivering a people strategy for 100,000 colleagues.

The second important thing is really thinking about the future. At Standard Chartered, we talk often about helping the next generation learn, earn and grow. Understanding the way the world is moving is important if you are going to leave a legacy that is more future-focused.

The last thing is that HR leaders have to have commercial acumen. When I work with new teams, I always encourage everyone to understand the balance sheet of the business and how we make money.

**Q. The relationship between the CHRO and the CEO is important. How should a CHRO candidate interview a CEO to ensure their relationship will be a productive one?**

A. It's very useful to get the CEO to verbalize in her or his own words their ambition for the people and culture agenda. Every business gets

the HR it deserves, and a lot of it comes down to the ambition of the CEO. If you don't have alignment, it's actually quite difficult.

Chemistry is important, and there's no real formula, but a massive part of the role is advisory, which is based on trust. And you need to have the trust of other members of the management team, not just the CEO. Otherwise, you'll have a dysfunctional dynamic that doesn't help move the organization forward.

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

A. As I was studying for my MBA, it became very clear to me that one of the biggest challenges the world was going to face was the gap between education and employability. And that skill gap was just going to grow, so focusing on human resources was a massive opportunity for me to try and address that big opportunity, especially in emerging markets.

**Q. What about earlier in your life? Who had a big influence on you?**

A. My father was in the military, and he had a real dedication and a sense of higher purpose in his work. I'm also part of a privileged generation of women in India who were not constrained by some of the societal norms that the generation before me faced.

There is a sense of responsibility that comes with that to ensure that I make something of the opportunities I've had. As an Indian woman

growing up in a very traditional world, trying to change the narrative for the next generation is a huge source of personal drive for me.