



Nigel Sullivan, chief people officer, Bupa



**Strategic CHRO**

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

# "You Can Be Empathetic, But You Don't Have To Shoulder People's Problems."

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*In our interview, **Nigel Sullivan**, the chief people officer at*

*London-based Bupa, shared insights from his years of leading HR functions at different companies, including the importance of setting emotional boundaries around the role.*

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

A. I got a degree in environmental science, and I was going to pursue a PhD but I got tired of test tubes and gas-liquid chromatography. I went to see the career adviser at university, and asked, “Is there anything else I could do?” It was the late 1980s, and he suggested marketing or personnel. Marketing wasn’t for me, so I read up on the field of HR, and managed to get a graduate trainee position at what is now Jaguar Land Rover.

**Q. And what about the field caught your interest?**

A. The reason it appealed to me so much was because I was from an applied science background, which is another way of saying a jack of all trades and master of none. And human resources is very similar to that. If you’re good with people, it helps. If you can make a presentation, it helps. If you’re analytical, it helps. If you’re introverted, sometimes it helps. If you’re extroverted, sometimes it helps. It’s a multidisciplinary thing. It’s reasonably technical but not too technical.

**Q. Given the breadth of the role, how do you create structure for it?**

A. There are three areas that I find to be the most impactful: making

sure that you have an engaged workforce, the right leadership, and that you are developing talent at all levels of the company.

And to me, there are two things that are key to building an engaged workforce – there's the micro and the meta. On the micro, most people don't work for a corporation; they work for a boss. And so you need to make sure the local leadership is accountable and understands how to listen to their teams and act on what they're hearing. On the meta level, you focus as a senior leadership team on what's going to drive the organization forward.

One of the questions we ask in our regular employee survey is, how confident are you about the prospects of Bupa? We know from analytical work that we've done that moving the dial on that particular topic will have a disproportionate effect on engagement overall.

**Q. What key leadership lessons have you learned about how to do this job?**

A. One is to be a businessperson first and an HR person second. Second, it's okay to like people. And that may sound like I'm being flippant, but I'm not. Over my career, I have had to fire more than 50,000 people. I've closed factories. I've fired bosses, I've fired colleagues, and I've fired people six months after I hired them.

My early days in the profession were very industrial, so I have a lot of experience with trade unions and labor agreements. My mentors early on advised me not to get too emotionally connected to people because

you will have to let some people go.

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and the confidant to the CEO  
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employees, as well."*

But I rejected that approach after a while because I thought I actually can distinguish between doing my job, which may include making some very difficult decisions, and treating someone with respect as a human being, as a friend, as a colleague.

I've never felt the conflict between the two things. You can be a technical expert and the confidant to the CEO and an advocate for employees, as well. You are a voice for people, and you can be empathetic and sympathetic, but you don't have to shoulder people's problems. It takes a while to learn that.

**Q. As the chief people officer, how do you think about your role on the leadership team?**

A. A few things come to mind. One is to be authentic always, so if you have to speak truth to power, being authentic helps. And I generally work on the basis of unconditional trust with people. So I will take everything that you're saying to me as true on its face. That has backfired on me a couple times, but I'll put up with those occasional moments to have most relationships built on trust.

*"I generally work on the basis of unconditional trust with people."*

Another is don't gossip. A lot of HR people gossip. I used to, and I don't anymore. It's not that I was a gossipy person, but it was probably born of insecurity early on in my career. You do pick up a lot of really interesting information.

I just had to build a firewall not to do it. I'm very respectful of those lines now, but I've seen people get in trouble by crossing them. Managing those boundaries can make the job quite lonely, and you just have to be aware of that and just be ready for it.

**Q. The relationship between the CHRO and the CEO is so crucial. What questions do you ask up front to make sure it's going to be a productive relationship for you?**

A. I want to understand something about their values as a human being – what are they interested in, why are they doing this, what drives them? Then the question is, can I help them? Is my experience going to be helpful to them? Because if it is, then I get some sense of fulfillment from that process.

**Q. I'd like to shift the conversation to you personally. What were some early influences for you?**

A. I'm from a working-class background in Ireland. I grew up in Belfast during the Troubles. When I was eleven, I passed an exam that got me into a state-funded grammar school. It was a good school, and we couldn't have afforded it otherwise.

So that was a good start, but I wasn't interested in doing a lot of work at school. I was more interested in playing soccer. But I remember one day, when I was about 15, and my friend and I were walking up this little valley on the outskirts of Belfast, and seeing these guys in the ravine – they were skinheads, and clearly high, swinging on some branches.

*"Bruce Springsteen provided  
me added motivation."*

At that moment I thought, hang on a minute. There were bombs going off every day in Belfast, and the unemployment rate was 22 percent in the country. I said to myself, "You better hit the books."

And Bruce Springsteen provided me added motivation. I play guitar and I was really into music, and I remember as a teenager walking around the streets of Belfast with "Born to Run" playing in my head, thinking about how we've got to "get out while we're young," as the song goes. The only way I knew was to go to university in England, and that's what I did.

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