



David Rodriguez, global chief HR officer, Marriott International



Strategic CHRO

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'CHROs Have Had To Take A Much More Central Leadership Role This Year'

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***David Rodriguez**, global chief HR officer at Marriott*

*International, shared his key lessons and insights with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

Reimer: Many leaders we've spoken with have pointed out this has been the year that HR leaders have really stepped into the spotlight.

Rodriguez: I'm seeing a wider consensus about the holistic nature of the role of CHRO now. In the past, success was defined for HR leaders by being financially conversant and focused on process and cost efficiency. But there's exponentially more value to be gained by cultivating human and social capital that drives innovation, entrepreneurialism, inclusiveness, and continuous learning — all these different attributes are important to a successful organization.

Today, the CHRO must be part futurist. You constantly have to be asking what is just around the corner and what are the right competitive responses for the organization. That's more important than ever because of the nature of disruption. It's swift, it is powerful, and no company can feel safe.

At the end of the day, it's all about human performance, and so the CHRO must constantly be assessing the implications of different scenarios for the human and social capital of the company. The CHRO also has to be part behaviorist. You need to really understand the universal human needs that inspire people and animate behavior. It's the only way that you're going to knit an organization across cultures if you're a global company.

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Finally, you've got to be part digital pioneer because you have to be very thoughtful about the evolution of work, and not only how you are going to help optimize performance for the company, but how you will mitigate potential human impact as disruption happens in the workplace. And of course, more important than anything else, you're a cultural steward.

Clearly, CHROs have had to take a much more central leadership role this year in their organizations, and it's a fantastic opportunity. It's not for the meek, but it certainly is a very needed service to be provided to organizations, and hopefully it's going to open up a golden age for the practice of human resources in organizations.

Bryant: What advice would you give to people who are stepping into the CHRO role for the first time?

Rodriguez: You're in the business of helping organizations succeed by promoting the wellbeing of people. That needs to be central, immutable, and we need to be thoughtful about what that means, because everything else is subordinate to that. It's my personal philosophy that the way you grow as a company is by unlocking the potential of human beings. There's no higher value that a CHRO can bring to the table.

The second point would be that how well and readily you acquire and apply new knowledge is infinitely more important than what you know today. The half-life of existing knowledge and skills continues to shrink. You have to constantly be learning and adapting or you're going to lose relevance. This would go for any leader, but you have to constantly be learning or your business is at risk. If you don't have that desire, inclination and skill to learn, that's hard to overcome.

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A CHRO also needs to extend the reach of their role and office through others. Ruth Bader Ginsberg famously said, "Fight for the things that you care about, but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." That is wise advice for any leader, and CHROs in particular. You and an engaged and inspired group of peers will accomplish more and do more good for your company from an HR perspective than you could ever accomplish on your own.

Any leader can sometimes get too focused on their relationship with the boss. My experience has been to recognize that the key to my being able to accomplish big things has less to do with my relationship with the boss. It has to do with my relationships with peers. How you cultivate those relationships will determine the extent to which you're successful in getting everyone in the company playing their role in the human resources work of the organization.

Reimer: What were important early influences for you that shaped who you are today?

Rodriguez: My parents came from Puerto Rico in the late 1950s, and I was born in New York. I didn't speak English until I went to kindergarten. The skin tones in my family vary a bit. I have a brother who's now deceased who had a much darker skin tone. I am fairly fair, and I have a brother who is quite blonde. My mother was more blondish, and my father was darker-skinned.

I share that because in this current racial-justice environment, I — as an Hispanic and part of a family with different skin tones — have a particular lens on diversity and inclusion, and certainly it informs and colors my approach to diversity and inclusion leadership at Marriott.

Also, both my parents were hourly workers. They got high school equivalencies. There were times when they were out of work when the plant closed, and we would be unsure about where the next meal was coming from. That certainly shaped me.

With that upbringing, I've always thought that I've got to outwork others, apply myself and leave nothing to chance. This almost irrational fear of one day being homeless always led me back to say, "I'm going to crack the books." And I was very fortunate to have many mentors along the way who steered me in the right direction.

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