



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR



Holly Paul

# 'The Role Of The CHRO Is To Be The Cultural Steward Of The Organization'



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*Holly Paul, CHRO at FTI Consulting, shared her key leadership lessons with my colleague, [David Reimer](#), CEO of [The ExCo Group](#), and me in our latest [Strategic CHRO](#) interview. [Subscribe here](#) for future interviews.*

**Reimer:** Every organization is working through some degree of transformation. What's your approach for driving change?

**Paul:** People can only absorb so much change. I feel very fortunate to be at a company like FTI because almost everything we sell are change programs. I have learned that you have to move quickly, and drive change within a six- to eight-month period. Beyond that, people start to lose

interest.

I've also found that when we're coming up with something that needs to change in the organization, building it is only one-third of the process. And that's actually the fun part, even though sometimes it can be tough to get people to agree if they have a different views on a particular issue.

The rest of the time is spent actually driving the initiative through the organization. People can forget that part, or want to move onto the next thing after they've developed something. But if you don't stick with it, then whatever you built is not getting absorbed, and then it's all for naught.

The other rule of thumb is to find willing buyers for your ideas. There are always willing buyers, and there are always people who are going to be resistant. And the third group is the largest, and they are the ones in between. So start with your willing buyers who want to see the change you're proposing. Get them onboard. Get them to help you deliver the benefits of the change and communicate the narrative.

Next, spend the majority of your time getting the people in the middle on board. Then allow the culture to take over for the naysayers. If you spend all your time with the resisters, many times you won't get there.

**Bryant: You've spent most of your career in professional services, an industry that has always required a lot of stakeholder management. Any lessons that you've learned that you can pass along about leading at a time when so many people feel that they should have a voice and a vote in company decisions?**

Paul: People are expressing their opinions way more than they used to. HR should embrace that as a positive, because when people speak up, at least you have an idea of what's important to them. Often you can channel that into a place that aligns with something in the company that they can be passionate about and involve themselves with.

The key is to communicate, communicate, communicate. And you have to do that authentically, and not provide a boilerplate, "This is our positioning and this is why." One of the things we do when we work with clients about an idea is

to really try and channel the skeptics in the room and talk about their views and how you respond to them. It's not just about understanding the skeptics in the room to manage the message to try and move past them. It's about engaging in that discussion in a fairly candid and transparent way.

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As just one example, people in organizations may have a lot of different views about the actions that the company should take around diversity. But you have to make strategic choices. We had those discussions at FTI Consulting years ago, and ultimately decided to focus our resources on underrepresented groups at the firm, which were mainly Black and Hispanic employees. I would open conversations by saying, "Because many of you will not agree with the choices that we made, I want to share with you what I heard, and where we are positioned as a company."

The best approach is to give your people the respect that they understand that not everyone, including themselves, can do 5,000 things at once, and to share the logic and rationale behind your decisions in a humble way, by acknowledging that not everyone will see the decision as the right call.

And then you say that you still want to engage with them on their priorities, which maybe the company can address at a later date. You're not always going to get alignment, but if you explain yourself well and continue to give them the opportunity to engage with you, you usually can win a lot of people over or at least get to a place of understanding.

**Reimer: What advice would you give to someone stepping into their first CHRO role?**

Paul: The first is to be courageous, and underpinning that is the idea that you will get more courage when you're working on things that deliver clear impact. So make sure you've got a few things that you're working on to deliver value in the areas that are important to key colleagues on the leadership team. Hopefully there will be some overlap with things that are on your list of HR priorities.

Once you build a track record of delivering on what's important to them, that then gives you the right to be courageous in other areas where you need to drive change and also in specific coaching conversations with leaders. Whatever those hot spots are, you've got to have the courage to have those conversations.

After all, the role of the CHRO is to be the cultural steward of the organization. When you look at companies where things have gone really awry, or you've found that leaders are either behaving very badly, often what is missing there is that courageous CHRO.

It's not like finance, where there are established principles to help guide all your decisions. In HR, it's harder because most things in HR are not legislated. Yes, there are legal standards that set a baseline. But the standards here at FTI Consulting, and for most other companies, are much higher, and it falls on the CHRO to define and uphold that standard.

**Bryant: What were important early influences that shaped you as a leader?**

Paul: My mom, who passed away years ago, was a huge influence on me. My parents divorced when I was very young, and she became a single mom raising two girls. She got a job as a secretary, which was her first real job after spending years as a traditional housewife. She moved up, got her company to pay for her MBA, and ended up becoming the head of marketing.

She then started her own company when I was in middle school. So I grew up in a home where things like movie nights on Friday were accompanied with stuffing envelopes of her latest newsletter. I would go to conferences with her and help set up the booth.

I had my first job in fifth grade, delivering newspapers. Even in college, I held two jobs. Work was life growing up. The office was in the basement of our townhouse. And on weekends, when I would wake up, the first thing I'd do was to go down to the basement because mom would be sitting at her desk. It was great because she would stop and spend some time hanging out. That work ethic that I learned from my mom has always been a part of me.