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HR Leadership Lessons from Non-Traditional CHROs

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CHRO's who come from non-HR backgrounds discover that HR is the most impactful of all functions. Their experience holds important lessons for all HR leaders.

CHRO's from non-HR backgrounds say the CHRO role can be the best and most impactful of all leadership positions. We interviewed CHROs who arrived at the role after careers outside of HR. In a recent Harvard Business Review article (https://hbr.org/2017/05/why-more-executives-should-consider-becoming-a-chro) we described how they approach the role differently: Focusing on business results not just people outcomes (http://www.visier.com/hr-leadership/why-connecting-workforce-outcomes-to-business-outcomes-matters/), pushing not just supporting fellow leaders, embracing opportunity not just reducing risk, and applying diverse business skills while supported by strong HR functional expertise.

What lessons can HR leaders learn from CHRO's with non-HR backgrounds?

HR leadership experts John Boudreau, David Creelman, and Peter Navin share new insights top CHROs should know

In this article, we dig deeper into the lessons from these CHROs that apply to all HR leaders, whether they pursue a traditional or non-traditional HR career path. Naturally, these leaders exemplify the well-known value of business acumen (https://www.visier.com/hr-leadership/hr-from-the-outside-in-learnings-from-dave-ulrich-father-of-modern-hr/) and strong ability to connect (http://www.visier.com/hr-leadership/why-connecting-workforce-outcomes-to-business-outcomes-matters/) HR, work, and organizational performance. However, their perspectives suggest a more nuanced combination of key factors that explains their success as CHRO's, and that combination holds lessons for all HR leaders.

Analytics x Iteration x Curiosity = Influence and Confidence

Recipes for HR success often rely on long lists of competencies and attributes for the HR leader. They are often treated as an additive set of features, where improvements in any of them add to the sum of HR value. Yet, our interviews suggest the success function is multiplicative.

HR leaders achieve influence and confidence through a combination of factors, and they must balance and reinforce each other. Our interviews suggested three factors: Analytics, Iteration and Curiosity.

The combination of these factors explains the confidence and influence of these non-traditional CHROs, traits that many say is too rare among traditional HR leaders. For each of these factors, our interviews offered some valuable perspectives and advice.

Analytics: Great Numbers Are Just the Start

Having good numbers and rigorous analysis is important, but our non-traditional HR leaders emphasized the reality that analytics fail without a compelling logic and a deep understanding about how to influence (https://www.visier.com/hr-leadership/its-like-harnessing-analogies-to-accelerate-hr/).

Paul Baldassari, Chief Human Resource Officer at Flex, paid attention to using data to lead better conversations. He said: "You need to meet the people where they are. And if you put numbers in front and make sure everybody is talking about the same numbers, you can have a much deeper conversation. I learned from my time in operations that if you want to have any candid conversation with a customer or a function, it's always good to talk about something that is indisputable. It creates the common ground."

Often, a top priority for non-traditional HR leaders was to improve the HR data and systems, to achieve a quality level they had experienced leading other functions. Analytics is part of the language of business. Making it part of HR's standard mode of operating, and making a conscious shift away from HR jargon, is part of what enabled these leaders to be successful in transforming their role.

Iteration: Taking Risks to Test and Learn

Striving for perfection can be the enemy of progress. Non-traditional leaders grew up in disciplines like product and systems development, which have evolved to embrace experimentation and innovation through iteration. Agile design means introducing imperfect products to users, and then learning and adapting fast.

Lucia Luce Quinn, Chief People Officer at Forrester Research, said, "The HR function should be agile and scrappy, getting stuff done with what you have. Every time I challenge my HR team that way, they become the group that others in the company rely on to do something really hard. They become leaders in the company not just functional leaders."

How do you develop an entrepreneurial, agile, and even scrappy mindset? The best places to do so may lie outside traditional HR roles.

George Bongiorno, Senior Client Partner at Korn Ferry, said, "Spending years in consulting is a good foundation for the HR role, because it develops your adaptability and agility. We think you develop that from early experiences, not classroom teaching."

Rick Jensen, Senior Vice President, Chief Talent Officer at Intuit, said, "I staff HR with people who think like product managers, because everything has to do with the end customer, and creating amazing experiences. We innovate rapidly and design for delight as we test and learn. Take risks!"

Curiosity: The Power is in the Question — Not the Answer

A great question (https://www.visier.com/hr-leadership/make-hr-analytics-a-priority-but-see-the-bigger-picture/) is often better than the "right" answer. Non-traditional leaders have the confidence to be curious, to learn and adapt, and seek out those that know more than they do.

Jensen added, "The idea of striving for a 'seat at the table' is learned helplessness – Have confidence in your voice!"

Baldassari saw a link between confidence and curiosity, "I realized that the offer of the HR role was an opportunity and a challenge, and that's what I really enjoy, something that can both help the company and help society. The HR role required me to be curious about organization development as we faced a large organizational transformation. We talk a lot about HR as curious enterprise leaders that can do pretty much everything."

Conclusions

HR leaders are offered many ideas on how to improve, what makes the suggestions in this article unusual is that they are from leaders who come to HR with an outside perspective.

They discovered HR was a golden place to be, but only if they brought in perspectives that are not as common in the function as they should be. Those perspectives are summarized by the equation **Analytics x Iteration x Curiosity = Influence and Confidence.**

Perhaps it's time for HR leaders to step back from their usual focus on programs, processes, and compliance and ask how they can bring more analytics, iteration, and curiosity to the function.

About the Authors:

John Boudreau: Professor and research director at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business and Center for Effective Organizations, and author of the forthcoming books, "Lead the Work (http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd%C2%AD%20201119040043.html)" with Ravin Jesuthasan and David Creelman and "Global Trends in Human Resource Management" (http://www.sup.org/books/title/?id=24277) with Edward E. Lawler III.

David Creelman: CEO of Creelman Research, is a globally recognized thinker on people analytics and talent management. Some of his more interesting projects included rethinking the nature of organizations in his book Lead the Work: Navigating a world beyond employment co-written with John Boudreau and Ravin Jesuthasan; as well as working with Dr. Henry Mintzberg on peer coaching, David's learning modules are among the most popular topics. Currently he spends a lot of time helping organizations in North America and Asia get on-track with people analytics. This work led to him being made a Fellow for the Centre of Evidence-based Management (Netherlands) for his contributions to the field.

Peter Navin: As a proven leader in high-growth, rapidly changing global organizations, Peter is passionate about reshaping the health care experience in his role as Grand Rounds' SVP of Employee Experience. Peter Navin has previously held the positions of CHRO at DocuSign and Senior VP of HR at Shutterfly. He is the author of the forthcoming book The CMO of People.