



EXCELLING IN THE ROLE OF CHIEF PLAYER/COACH

CHROs must effectively manage all HR operations and work across the top leadership team to align the organization. Here are three key skills HR leaders need when serving as player and coach.

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2020 made it clear that CHROs have to excel in a dual role: player/coach. They must continue fulfilling the player side of their role—handling core responsibilities such as designing compensation and benefits plans, implementing learning and development programs, and crafting hiring strategies. At the same time, as coaches, they must help their C-suite colleagues shine in *their* jobs. That means enabling them to act adaptively and effectively in response to increasingly urgent disruptions facing the organization.

Demographic changes present further challenges with young people yearning to feel a stronger sense of purpose and meaning through their work. What's more, with many young people marrying later and eschewing organized religions or civic clubs, they're looking to their employer to provide their primary connection to society.

C-suite leaders increasingly are expected to serve as agents of stability and societal cohesion while still maximizing shareholder returns. CHROs must help in critical new ways.

Enter the CHRO

Typically operating largely behind the scenes, CHROs today must coach everyone else on the executive team—from the CEO and COO to the heads of major functions such as IT, marketing and finance—to keep the organization aligned and responsive through waves of disruption. Common advice given to executive leaders—“Lean in,” “Be vulnerable,” “Be empathetic,” “Keep communicating”—all of this will still matter. But as coach and teacher, the CHRO will need to bring that advice to life for each executive.

In the player/coach role, CHROs will have to strike many delicate balances. For instance, as they fulfill their traditional responsibilities, they'll also need to impart hard truths to their peer executives. For many CHROs, it's not easy to tell the CEO something like, “Our latest internal survey shows that half of our employees don't

think we're doing enough to combat social injustice," or "We're losing out on the best talent because job candidates don't trust our management to safeguard their health and well-being."

Constructively challenging their peers gets even more difficult when a CHRO must also serve as confidant and trusted advisor to these same leaders on matters vital to the organization's people and culture.

What makes an effective player/coach? In my three decades of working with CEOs, boards and investors in assessing leadership and organizational culture, I've found that the very best player/coaches demonstrate three core competencies.

Mastering the Player/Coach Role: Three Competencies

Every CHRO can excel as a player/coach by mastering three competencies: (1) think systems; (2) serve as keeper of the organization's purpose and values; and (3) be the organization's strategic talent architect. By strengthening their prowess in these areas, CHROs can help the executive team effectively navigate the increasing disruption confronting organizations.

1. Thinking Systems: The Sonar.

In *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*, Peter Senge argued that too many organizations look to simple, linear solutions in attempting to solve complex problems. These solutions are palliative at best, because they don't get at the underlying and interrelated systemic forces that create and perpetuate organizational problems.

In contrast, systems thinking holds that an organization's parts often affect each other in unexpected and hard-to-see ways. Take diversity and inclusion programs. Executives who are linear thinkers might say: "We don't have enough diversity in our workforce, so let's establish race- and gender-based hiring quotas for our managers"—an overly simple solution with predictable downside risks. Systems-thinking CHROs would seek to understand subtler, less visible interactions between multiple forces, and use that understanding to arrive at a more effective and enduring solution. For example, they might suggest first interviewing a cross-section of employees, managers and executives to grasp what has led to a lack of diversity in the workforce. These interviews might reveal that even when teams comprise employees of diverse backgrounds, such employees have been made to feel unwelcome in the organization.

Applying linear thinking to problems stemming from systemic forces is like addressing the overt symptoms of a disease instead of the underlying illness. Without that mindset across the C-suite, any linear improvements to complex problems will likely prove temporary and could trigger consequences no one intended or wanted. For example, using guaranteed bonuses to attract and reward the best talent may dis-incentivize top performers who want rewards to be based on merit.

In their player/coach role, systems-thinking CHROs also advise their peer executives on which levers to pull to improve the system. Levers can take numerous forms but often focus on the organizational processes that reinforce behavior, such as reward programs. "What are we really rewarding here?" is a simple but powerful question that CHROs can ask to raise the executive team's awareness of possible long-term consequences of short-term compensation solutions.

In embodying this kind of thinking, CHROs act as a kind of sonar—detecting the complex interplay of forces that lie below the surface of visible operations. This mindset extends beyond the organization as well to dynamics among the company; its competitors, customers and consumers; suppliers; talent pools; and communities where the business operates. Increasingly, HR leaders must monitor undercurrents within this larger system, analyze implications for their organization and leadership, and use the resulting insights to advise and coach other senior leaders on how best to respond.

By monitoring social media activity in labor pools, for example, HR executives can assess perceptions of the company, its leadership and level of commitment to social responsibility. CHROs can then use this insight to drive the right messaging to hiring managers and executive leadership.



BECOMING A SYSTEMS THINKER

- Always keep the larger system in mind, seeking to understand how your organization's sub-systems affect each other. Ask questions that get at underlying or interrelated forces that others may not see within the larger system—such as “Which behaviors are our reward programs encouraging, and are these the behaviors we want?”
- Keep the symptom/disease framework front of mind. Is a problem that you or a colleague is grappling with a simple one-off situation, or does it reflect a deeper, more complex ailment afflicting your organization?
- Articulate the implicit—not espoused—values driving your organization's culture. You'll help others see the often invisible logic that's maintaining the status quo and triggering resistance to change.
- Before considering a change, ask yourself what, if any, unintended negative consequences it might produce.

2. Serving as Keeper of the Organization's Purpose and Core Values: The Compass.

An organization's purpose and core values powerfully influence how it operates and how it performs on a wide range of metrics, especially during periods of disruption. For example, a company whose purpose and values center on safeguarding the well-being of employees, customers and the planet will be more likely to swiftly reconfigure its operations in the face of health threats like a fast-spreading virus. And by doing so, it will stand a better chance of keeping the best talent on board and retaining its best customers.

Because purpose and values matter so much, they need a steward—someone who will keep them at the forefront of discussions and decision-making on the executive team and in the organization. In today's world, where information spreads fast and wide thanks to social media, actions that contradict an organization's stated purpose or values won't go unseen, or unpunished, by employees and customers.

In well-led organizations, the entity's purpose and core values are articulated and modeled by the CEO and every member of the executive team. However, the organization can stay true to its purpose and values only if they also guide the countless decisions that all employees make every day.

Decisions and actions are also strongly influenced by processes related to human capital management, which the CHRO directly drives. Thus, by designing such processes (part of their player role), CHROs have a vital opportunity to serve as keepers of their organization's purpose and core values.

Consider the core values of diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Last year, Mary Barra, CEO of General Motors, said:

We want to create an inclusive environment where everybody can bring their true self to work, because we believe that is what really empowers people and leads to the most engaged workforce. It's hard to argue against wanting to create an environment where everybody can be themselves.

When organizations foster a culture where differences are valued, and where people feel welcomed and safe to express their identity and ideas, they activate a powerful positive cycle: Employee engagement, workforce morale and creative problem solving all improve. That boosts productivity among teams, ultimately driving stronger financial performance.

As core values, diversity and inclusion are hard to beat. Yet fostering an inclusive culture takes many hands. It can certainly start with the CEO's vision and endorsement. But the organization's values, customs and traditions—as well as processes like hiring, promoting and firing—play an equally important role. Why? CHROs who understand the complex causal connections that foster or erode inclusivity know how to design policies and processes that align these below-the-surface determinants to drive desired changes. They translate the CEO's pronouncements about the importance of inclusiveness into business processes that encourage enduring inclusive behavior.

Deploying their systems mindset, CHROs are in a unique position to put the company's core values into action, by knowing the desired destination and steering the ship to get there. For instance, to further support diversity and inclusion, a CHRO might propose recruiting talent from urban or rural areas with disadvantaged populations or sponsoring high school STEM or STEAM programs.

Finally, as part of their coach role, CHROs must be prepared to deliver difficult feedback to their colleagues, and constructively confront them if a decision or action conflicts with the organization's purpose or values. By acting as a kind of compass, CHROs help restore the organization to its proper direction.

Such conversations can be sensitive and tricky, but again, good coaches don't shy away from imparting hard truths. The most constructive way CHROs can point out that a decision goes against the company's purpose or one of its values is to share the observation privately, along with suggestions to remedy the situation. They can also make the CEO aware of the situation and quietly effect the necessary realignment.

SERVING AS KEEPER OF THE PURPOSE AND CORE VALUES

- Ensure that discussion of your organization's purpose and values is regularly incorporated into executive meetings and that everyone in the organization knows and models them.
- Remind your peers that employees will view executives' decisions based on to how well they align with the organization's purpose and values.
- Use your own understanding of purpose and values to help your peers speak powerfully on the topic. Tell a story or two about how you came to appreciate the importance of leaders' alignment on purpose and values. Help your colleagues come up with language about these topics that's natural for them and that they feel comfortable sharing with employees.
- Help your peers honestly assess their ability to embody and model the organization's purpose and values. Reference recent 360-degree feedback findings and other data to help them determine how they can best strengthen their self-awareness.

3. Being the Organization's Strategic Talent Architect: The Propeller.

Many talent-related processes that CHROs oversee are tactical and relevant for meeting the organization's shorter-term needs for specific skills. But to excel in the player/coach role, these executives need a longer-term view. They must know how to craft talent management strategies that will enable the organization to bring in skills and expertise that will matter in the future.

I call this competency "strategic talent architect," because CHROs who are good at this start by understanding what the business's strategy is for the future, and then articulate the talent needed to execute that strategy. While many non-HR executives see disruption as a constant for years to come, they're also increasingly concerned that lack of the right talent to meet that disruption in the future could prove catastrophic.

Yes, many organizations already have chief learning officers or chief talent officers, and there may be some overlap between those roles and the CHRO role. But true strategic talent architects are laser-focused on the long-term future: What talent will the company need at least five years from now? The design and implementation of programs and policies related to near-term talent acquisition and development can be the purview of others, but the CHROs' close working relationships with the CEO and board position them to think about how best to propel the business toward the horizon.

In embodying this propulsive force, great CHROs also take ownership of important evergreen processes, including succession planning for the organization's leadership ranks. While senior business leaders collaborate with the CHRO to keep a pulse on where the talent is, it's the CHRO's responsibility to ensure that the organization's talent strategies map to the future-focused business strategy. Effective management of evergreen processes links the present and future in a way that effectively addresses disruption. For instance, if an organization's business strategy is being disrupted by new technologies, business models, or data privacy and security issues, then an adroit CHRO would

BECOMING THE STRATEGIC TALENT ARCHITECT

- Continually ask your fellow executives, "Where is the business headed?" Keep the business strategy front and center as you craft talent strategies.
- Translate the long-term business strategy into skill sets that should be included in current and future development programs. Make sure that skills your organization will need in the long term are being selected and developed for now.
- Move as far upstream in the war for talent as possible. For example, design a robust high-potential program to broaden the training and development of professionals early in their careers.
- Chair a special executive team meeting at least twice a year to discuss the organization's most crucial long-term talent needs. With your peers, define the "leader of the future" and identify the relevant competencies to incorporate into current learning and development programs.

WHEN EXECUTIVES DON'T WANT TO BE COACHED BY THE CHRO

- Make sure you have "the will and the skill" to tackle this challenge. If necessary, strengthen your own abilities on the three player/coach competencies described in this article, and consider asking another CHRO who excels in this area to mentor you.
- Talk with your CEO about the value of the player/coach role. Be sure you have your CEO's support.
- Draw on real-world examples of CHROs who excel in this role—and who have helped deliver measurable business results for their organization.
- Never force a skeptical colleague to accept coaching. Instead, convey valuable feedback—through formal or informal means. You'll achieve a similar outcome, without having to sell your support as coaching.

design a succession plan that aligns development of high-potential employees' skills with those future-critical skill needs in mind.

Last, CHROs must help engineer the changes and processes needed to level the playing field for all candidates to compete, regardless of race, gender, ethnicity, age and other types of differences. By doing so, CHROs can position their organization to reap the benefits from diversity, including greater levels of innovation, higher-quality services and competitive new business models.

Examples of how to level the playing field include countering the impact of implicit biases and systemic racism on processes such as recruiting, interviewing and hiring. For instance, training programs can be designed to teach hiring managers about common cognitive biases that cause us all to feel more comfortable with people who are similar to us. Managers can learn how to recognize when such biases are causing them to give short shrift to job candidates who are different from them and yet are highly qualified for the role in question.

Gut Check for Aspiring Player/Coaches

Excelling at the player/coach role isn't easy. If you're a CHRO who hasn't yet mastered the coaching side of this dual role, you'll want to do a thorough gut check to make sure you don't stumble over common pitfalls. These include needing to be liked by your CEO and peers and thus shying away from delivering constructive feedback, needing to excessively control others, and falling for the inevitable political traps that come with the job.

By understanding these common pitfalls, you can more readily—and candidly—identify your own areas for development. Self-awareness, in turn, helps you guard against these and other risks and allows you to excel in this unique and vital role. The payoff? You'll help your organization to not just ride out ongoing waves of disruption but also seize the new opportunities, now and in the future, that disruption presents. ■■



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