

Bringing Human Resources into the Inner Circle

What should a forward-thinking CEO expect from their Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO), and how can the CHRO support, collaborate with, and educate the CEO? Farber’s Human Capital Consultant, Sandy Heymann, along with members of Farber’s CHRO network, met virtually with Canadian retail leader and former President of Hudson’s Bay (HBC), Alison Coville, to probe the perspectives of the human-centered CEO.

The pandemic has brought new urgency to the responsibilities of human capital professionals, including the role of the CHRO, in advising and supporting the CEO. This includes tackling the paradigm shifts required in managing the company’s most valuable resource—its people. As CEOs strive to maintain employee motivation amidst remote work and the challenges this brings, the CHRO has forged a position next to the CEO to ensure employees remain healthy, happy, connected and productive.

Having held various senior executive roles over 20 years at HBC, Alison Coville has first-hand experience partnering with the CHRO to build a strong organization.

The following are Alison’s answers from her discussion with Sandy Heymann and the *GlassRatner Leadership Catalyst* group. The conversation has been edited for clarity and brevity.

Over your time as a C-suite executive, how have you seen HR’s role change?

HR was traditionally tasked with hiring and paying people and some policy and compliance matters. The CHRO has evolved to become the ‘guardian’ of the people, responsible for insights on what’s happening in the organization. Strategically, the CHRO should participate actively in key meetings with all stakeholders—not just employees and managers. That means being involved as a true partner. The best HR partners challenge the CEO and covers any blind spots. HR also needs to be honest with C-suite executives when they are not showing up.

What was clear early in the pandemic was the need for companies to be agile and make decisions quickly. Now that

a year has gone by, how do companies maintain that speed?

The “need for speed” is not just a temporary phenomenon. Digitization and analytics will continue to be useful tools for decision-making, but real efficiency comes from applying 90-day priority setting, which combines speed with disciplined leadership.

In times of crisis, everything feels like a priority. To set objectives, organizations need to bring intelligent leaders together in squads or task forces. And we shouldn’t be afraid to include all levels of management—leaders in crisis can’t pretend to know all the answers themselves. Your teams don’t expect that you’ll have all the answers either. What they do expect is to be involved and consulted on matters of concern within their scope. The most successful leaders don’t come up with solutions in a closed room. They are the ones who foster diversity, tap the expertise in the organization, and encourage multiple viewpoints. That also has the effect of placing accountability at all levels in the organization.

The task force mindset should also be grounded in progression over perfection. The results may not be perfect, but some element of failure comes with taking risks. Those failures can and should be celebrated, along with the successes, since both are valuable learning experiences. So, fail fun and fail forwards—but decide strategically on what needs to be accomplished, and finish the task without adding all sorts of new priorities to complicate things.

How did you handle transformation in the organization?

As the most senior person in Canada at HBC, I knew the importance of being an inclusive leader. The best way to be present, open and visible is to interact with people regularly and in real time. I would schedule meetings to get updates on projects, but if there weren’t material updates, I’d use the meeting to connect on other matters or to gain insights. It’s important to constantly ask people what’s happening and be forward-looking. Everyone has a voice and an opinion, and it’s especially important to hear from those closest to the customer.

Team building can be a challenge in the current environment. How can we build teams effectively?

Before the pandemic, HR executives spent a lot of time walking the floor to get the pulse of the organization, but what used to be keeping an ear to the ground is now keeping an ear to Zoom. Getting a feel for what’s happening has become a more subtle skill. Body language and how people appear on screen sends a message. As a senior exec dealing with virtual teams, it’s clear to me that sometimes people are not engaged, so when the opportunity arises to meet one-on-one and develop a relationship, I take it.

To facilitate team building, people must communicate and get to know each other. But connections need to be manufactured now because they don’t happen naturally. How do you capture the dynamic of the offsite, the town hall, or the cocktail hour, which have all vanished? HR leaders should invest in ideas that create a sense of connectivity and bring people together in both business and less formal settings.

What should HR's top priorities be in 2021?

Now is a good time for leaders to reflect on how the pandemic affected their organization and how prepared they were to deal with it. Each crisis is different, but they all involve speed of decision making, minimizing impacts on employees and customers, and protecting shareholder value.

HR has a role in quick decision making by providing valuable information on human impacts, but HR's greatest support may come in guiding the CEO in the complementary role as 'Chief Empathy Officer'.

What should HR do to change the game?

The CHRO and CEO must work together in moving inclusivity and diversity forward. These objectives were on the agenda pre-pandemic, but crises often expose weaknesses. As with all corporate goals, things don't change until they are measured and reported. The CEO and CHRO need to generate quantifiable results and hold themselves accountable just as they would with other deliverables.

Attitude is what brings about the change. CEOs need to talk about their successes in diversity and inclusion and CHROs must encourage leaders to surround themselves with diversity. Inclusion applies to minorities, but it's also generational. Do younger employees have a voice to be able to share their insights? The grass is greener where you water it and everyone in the organization needs to be heard and given the means to advance.

Having stepped down from your role with HBC and as someone in transition yourself, how are you preparing for the next stage in your career?

I started looking back at when I was happiest. I took account of three things:

1. What are my skills?
2. What am I most passionate about?
3. How do I monetize this?

The fact is, I am happiest when strategizing about how to further an organization. But to find my next challenge, I need to use my network and realized that after 20 years, my network was not as robust as I would have liked. Fortunately, as I've started reaching out to people, I've been overwhelmed by the number of people in executive level roles who are willing to help. So, the advice I would give is to make networking a priority—create a diverse network.

2020 saw the need for leaders to step into unfamiliar territory and lead with compassion, empathy and the realization that

they don't have all the answers. This will remain unchanged in 2021. Last year also saw the spotlight turn to the CHRO, and this will continue to intensify as the workforce of the future is further debated. Strategies on diversity, inclusion and equity were also elevated through 2020 and will deservedly remain a priority focus of CHROs' attention.

CHROs and their teams have taken an all-for-one and one-for-all attitude, an approach which is required to solve some of the most complex challenges organizations have ever faced. Creating diverse teams that can work together for the good of every employee—both current and future—is no small task. If 2020 has taught us anything, it's that the CHROs who has led their companies through such a challenging year are well equipped to tackle 2021 head on.

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