

# **The Art and Science of the CHRO Role: Tales of a Chief Human Resource Officer**

*By Eva Sage-Gavin  
Global EVP Human Resources and Corporate Affairs, Gap Inc.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

I often comment to fellow colleagues that there should be a handbook that all new CHROs receive on day one. The reality? The Chief Human Resource Officer's role is not as clearly defined as it is for a CEO or CFO-- and it never will be.

In the last 30 years of my career, I've watched, learned and participated in shaping the roles, responsibilities and expectations of the HR field. And today, seven years into my current role as CHRO, I'm amazed by the amount of change we face as HR leaders.

A competitive business environment, an economic downturn, an increase in downsizing, globalization, and wary consumers are just a few things impacting our field.

The challenges are not insurmountable but demand the right mix of disciplines. Some of our business is science, and some of it is art. To be successful you need to find the right balance to both. Here is my perspective.

## **THE SCIENCE OF BEING A CHRO**

Success comes when you have a clear agenda and can address the expectations of your constituents, balancing the four active roles of the CHRO.

1. External business leader
2. Internal business partner
3. Employee advocate
4. Team leader

### **Role #1 External Business Leader**

This was the biggest area of change for me. External pressures came from all angles. I needed to be deliberate and thoughtful in how I interacted with partners, vendors, potential employees, customers and communities. I needed to take a leadership role in when and how messages were being delivered and perceived, whether through advertising, media stories, volunteer efforts, social responsibility, recruiting campaigns or the company's annual report.

To succeed in this role, I focused on becoming a strong brand ambassador, a go-to resource for senior management, an advocate for governance, and a thought leader:

### **Ambassador of your Employer Brand**

Being an ambassador is not a marketing job – it's serving as a role model for everything your brand represents. At Gap Inc., for instance, creativity and integrity are key values. By embodying the brand through your actions and communications, you will motivate employees and create awareness about a positive workplace.

### **Resource and Counsel for the Board of Directors**

By exhibiting financial acumen and demonstrating a full understanding of how your corporation works, you'll be better equipped to support the board and present solutions to the complex HR challenges that often face public companies.

### **Leader of Governance for People-Related Policies & Practices**

Reputation, integrity and transparent communication can all impact your stock price. A CHRO needs to lead and support policies, organizational structures and operating practices that are effective and help mitigate risk for the entire enterprise. Plan ahead, anticipate challenges, and be prepared to make sound, confident decisions.

### **Thought Leader for the HR Profession**

Speak up about the top issues facing your company and industry. Whether it's healthcare, global challenges or industry-specific issues, you need to understand and embody what your company stands for and be willing to share these with others. My desire to do this led "HR Executive Magazine" and the Corporate Leadership Council to honor not only my efforts but those of my company.

### **Role #2 Internal Business Partner**

Perhaps the most fundamental role for the CHRO is to drive the internal initiatives that enable business strategies, strengthen leadership and engage the hearts and minds of employees. Think of yourself as both the integrator and the glue that binds the company together. Be deliberate in how you show up and how people perceive you. It will make a difference in how you are valued and trusted.

The CHRO is more than a talented HR professional. They are trusted peers who deliver thoughtful counsel and – importantly – are general business managers who understand their business and industry. As such, they know how to build people and HR strategies in a way that directly supports business objectives and helps drive productivity.

As a CHRO, you are the developer and staunch supporter of your company's culture and values. Every company culture is an important lever for CHROs. And across the companies I have worked with -- including PepsiCo, Disney, and Gap Inc. – the cultures differed greatly. However, a company's culture can make or break success depending on how you navigate/embrace/support it.

One of the most effective ways to uphold your organization's culture is to ensure your reward and recognition behaviors truly support it in a way that is genuine for its employees.

### **Role #3 Employee advocate**

We often get so busy managing that we forget to be an advocate for our employees. You and your team must be a safe harbor for employees to go, while at the same time making sure that

you don't over-align with employees or managers, therefore blurring the lines of objectivity. It's a delicate balance. Keep the channels open and take "open door" and "roundtable" meetings. Stay connected and visible.

### **Role #4 Team leader**

It may go without saying, but you must remember your own team. This can be hard to do given the many other groups that depend on you. If you aren't leading and inspiring the HR team to excellence, the perception of HR will suffer and so will your employee population. As a leader you want to build and lead a highly functioning HR community. As an architect, you want to design and lead initiatives that create high-performance teams while ensuring your HR pipeline is well developed. And as a coach and mentor, you want to staff a diverse team and empower and inspire them to do the same with their own managers and staff.

## **THE ART OF BEING A CHRO**

While success with defining your roles and responsibilities and delivering results will get you pretty far, if you don't succeed on the "soft stuff", you will fail. After all, the soft stuff is really the hard stuff.

Following are seven lessons learned on the job along with the do's, the don'ts and some questions or actions for you to consider now, before you step into the top seat:

### **1. Understand the Role of the Board of Directors**

Remember your Board members are not management, they are not your boss; they are your colleagues. Getting their approval depends more importantly on their confidence in you; not just the tactics of a plan or process. If you don't have a seat at the table, advocate for your inclusion.

### **2. Spend Balanced Time with All Your Colleagues**

Your peers will look at you differently in the CHRO role than they will in divisional or departmental roles because you are now both their HR person and the gatekeeper for corporate human capital initiatives. The shift to CHRO means you are driving business strategy, mitigating risk, sometimes making tough calls and managing Board pressures.

The tough part is ensuring you remain the eyes and ears for senior leaders and still maintain balance and trust among your peers and team.

### **3. Be a Business Executive First**

As I mentioned earlier, CHROs need to make it a priority to know the business. Although this seems elementary, it's a shift from the traditional HR role. Develop a clear understanding of product, customers, competition and financial status. Be sure you can articulate how people strategies tie to these pieces and test your opinions against all aspects of the business.

### **4. Think Global, Act Global**

International companies have a whole set of challenges. Having worked for several global brands though the years, I've learned not to take U.S.-centric attitudes with me. I've also had the opportunity to travel to global offices to see first-hand how our reputation and culture is translating across geographical boundaries. It requires you to remain flexible without diluting the core beliefs of the organization.

### **5. Develop a “Personal Board of Directors”**

They will help you stay in balance, especially when facing tough choices. There will be issues that no one internally can help you with. How do you prepare the CEO's performance review for the Board? Who do you ask for advice when the Board expects you to be an expert? How do you deal with a boss or colleagues who are failing and not responding to coaching?

Develop your own external personal “Board of Directors.” This is a safe set of external resources where you can get advice, calibration and mentoring. Keep connections strong and reciprocate the favor. Start building that trusted network now.

### **6. Make Time for your Personal Life**

No matter what people tell you, the job of CHRO is 24/7. Every year you get better at balancing it, but you have to be ready emotionally and physically. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

I speak from experience. After 17 relocations, I've learned from every single one and applied them to my professional – and personal -- life. Know your boundaries and also let people know your boundaries. Invest in your emotional and physical health and never compromise on the things that make you a whole person—and stay in the moment. This relieves you of the possible guilt on not doing something else.

### **7. Understand and Develop your Personal Brand**

Developing your brand starts with self-awareness. Be impeccably honest with yourself and assess your strengths, weaknesses, personality preferences, leadership type and perceived persona within the company. Put yourself through the same tools you put everyone else through – such as 360 assessments and coaching.

## **In Summary**

All of these insights are a starting point. We all need to network with other CHROs and learn from each other. I challenge you to get started today whether you are already in the top seat or working to sit there someday in the future.