



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

'If Somebody Isn't A Really Agile, Engaged Learner, They Will Fall Behind.'

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***Bill Strahan**, the executive vice president of HR at Comcast Cable, shared his key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **Merryck**, in the latest installment of our **Strategic CHRO interview series**.*

Reimer: How did you get into HR?

Strahan: I went to Villanova University and intended to be a professional theologian. I was going to become a scholar and a professor, and then realized that I was not smart enough to do that and that theologians don't make a whole lot of money. I talked to my professor and he said, "My brother-in-law does something called HR. You remind me a lot of him. You should go do that."

I stayed with it because it's an absolutely fascinating vantage point. You get to cover the entirety of the business. You get to influence and shape almost everything that's going on in the building or in the market. I also found that some of my innate skills played well in that environment.

Bryant: Are there aspects of your theology training that you use in the job?

Strahan: Absolutely. The reason I was interested in theology is that I'm fascinated by why people do the things that they do. If you're going to be good at HR, you have to understand what people are looking to accomplish for themselves, because inevitably they will regress to that mean of "This is what I'm trying to do for myself." To the extent that you can make in the right direction.

And in any of the social sciences, you have to be good at reading and writing and communicating and expressing things that are complex. Sometimes the ideas are not always tangible, so being able to articulate them in a way that makes them real and practical and actionable for people today is important.

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You have to be able to craft a story, to engage people, to get your message across, and that might be with a turn of phrase or an image that people can connect with. Many times in my career, I've been the intermediary to tell management what folks on the shop floor think, or to explain to folks on the shop floor the reasons for a new strategy from management. It's about having empathy on both sides, and then finding the language that builds understanding and cooperation.

Reimer: How do you think about balancing employee activism, so that people feel they have a voice while also maintaining a focus on work and driving the strategy?

Strahan: This is going to become more difficult, as employees bring us more questions about social issues. One way to deal with this is to not wait for the issues or questions to come up, and instead take the initiative to say to employees that part of our total rewards system is to give everyone tools to keep them as healthy as possible and as satisfied as possible in areas of your life that are part of who we are as a company and part of who we aren't.

We set some boundaries by saying that we want to do everything we can to help people be successful in every aspect of their lives, but there are some things we can impact directly and some things that we can't.

We also emphasize that our large workforce is representative of America. Everybody who voted for anybody is in our workforce. Everybody who holds any opinion is in our workforce. Respect has to be a fundamental value of how we will work together so that we try to find common ground when we can.

Bryant: The whole question of culture is becoming a bigger priority for boards. What's

your framework for thinking about and measuring cultural health?

Strahan: When somebody says, “I’m going to talk to you about culture,” the one thing they’re almost never addressing very well is culture. It might be that really they are speaking to culture when they are talking about a plan to shut down a division, or the reasoning behind an acquisition, or whether a key leadership role is going to be filled from an internal or external candidate.

A savvy board figures out that the way to understand the culture is by watching how risk gets managed around the critical issues that executives are most proud of or most concerned about. And data is important. We’ve relied a lot on employee surveys. We use NPS internally. We produce data on how people feel, and we share verbatim comments from employees.

Reimer: What does it take to develop the CHRO of the future?

Strahan: I do like people coming either up through the ranks of HR or at least having had a couple of preparatory jobs in HR. The reason is that to be an effective CHRO, you have to be competent in the functions of HR. You have to understand how these pieces work if you’re going to bring them together as a strategic platform.

If you’re willing to allow the CHRO to have as their primary competence the procurement of “somebody else” to provide HR services, then you’re going to get a chief HR procurement officer. But there’s a big gulf between really good versus outstanding in terms of the delivery of certain HR services and functions.

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One thing that is really important to me is for the HR team to never talk about an “HR program,” and instead to talk about an “HR product.” Programmatic excellence is small-minded, it’s elitist, it’s unilateral. It’s better to think of the CHRO as the chief product manager for management, culture and people services.

If you think of yourself that way, it puts you in a mindset of “I am a competitor. I am competing in a marketplace for your passion, your attention and your talent.” You have to earn it and re-earn it all the time, as opposed to having a more programmatic view, in which you think that if my design is elegant enough, I can flip this switch and this is how everyone will react. That just isn’t true, and it’s not a way to be really excellent.

Bryant: What are the X-factors that really separate people for you?

Strahan: I try to avoid ever talking about the “best talent” and “world-class talent.” I don’t know that that thing exists. I believe that talent is about the match, and getting the right talent is the goal, as opposed to some ethereal view of the best talent.

Talent is always in the context of the team and in the context of the challenge that that talent is going to be applied against. I think that some people let themselves off the hook just by hiring somebody based on their resume and what they’ve done. Your job is not done if you think you’ve hired a “world-class athlete.” You’ve got to figure out how to make the team work. The idea that there is one standard of quality that will match up against the complexity of any challenge is crazy, I think. So I talk a lot about the right talent as opposed to best talent.

That said, being an agile learner is critical. The clock speed of the growth of information is quickening and the need to build digital toolkits is growing. If somebody isn’t a really agile, engaged learner, they will fall behind. You have to make sure that you’ve got agile learners who will make the adjustments along the way based upon them seeing the world as a changing place.

Reimer: Who was an important early influence for you in your career?

Strahan: I worked for a woman, Kathy McKenzie, twice in my career, and she taught me a lot about a certain form of passion. She taught me the value of being unreasonable, in terms of setting ambitious goals for the organization. A lot of us think that being the most reasonable person in the room is a virtue, but that is not always the case.

She taught me to not be afraid to use the power of this role. If you’re going to be effective as the head of HR, you are going to need to accumulate power — not in the sense of cutting people off at the knees, but more in the sense of clean, effective power that is earned and given because people recognize that when you have power, you do good things with it. She taught me that and also to occasionally be unreasonable in my asks in order to move something critical forward.