



Know Your Purpose In Your Role, And Make Sure Your Calendar Is Aligned To Those Goals

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Kevin Cox, former CHRO of GE, American Express, and Pepsi Bottling Group, shared candid insights with Adam Bryant. Key themes include optimizing the human-to-AI organization, the shift from farm team to free agent talent thinking, and the discipline of anchoring every day to a clearly written purpose.

Bryant: What do you see as the biggest challenges in the coming years for HR leaders?

Cox: One of my CEO clients says it better than I could. He calls it "optimizing the human-to-AI organization." Every word in that phrase is important. It's about finding the right balance of the human factor and the AI factor.

I think of CHROs as the primary architects of a company's operating model. It is fundamentally about who does what work? Where is it done? How is it done? What's strategic? CHROs are going to have to grapple with this.

The second thing is that CHROs are the leaders of human capital for their CEO and their boards. Traditional career ladders are going to be disrupted by AI, so you've got to think about how you grow talent in an organization in a very different way.

We're moving from "farm team" thinking about talent to more "free agent" thinking about talent, because the urgency to find the right talent is greater than most companies' ability to grow it themselves. So it's going to still be a war for talent, but it's going to feel different.

I also think that C-suite succession is going to get a lot harder. You already have flatter structures, so you don't have the lower-risk ways of building up to these senior C-suite jobs. And the patience of owners is shrinking. Whether your company is publicly or privately held, owners just seem to have less patience for waiting for results.

Bryant: There's so much disruption in the world, and the pace at which companies need to transform is only picking up. That's putting a lot of stress on employees. What is the best way for leaders to navigate that particular challenge?

Cox: I worked for Ken Chenault at American Express for 13 of my 14 years as head of HR there. He would often say, "A leader's job is to define reality and give hope." That approach is particularly valuable in a crisis, and perhaps you could call today a sustained crisis, given that we are moving from one disruption to another pretty quickly.

As leaders, we have a role in both being straight with employees about what is happening and what has to change. I always tried to talk with as much credibility as I could muster about why I thought we were going to get through a particularly tough stretch, and why I believed we were going to get through it stronger than we went into it.

When I talked to my leadership team, I would always tell them, "You first of all need to convince yourself about the plan. You have to ask, 'Do I believe this?' And the answer needs to be yes if you are going to stand on a town hall stage and try to convince somebody else."

On the AI front, we're inevitably going to create some anxiety or some chaos if we're honest with people when we talk about this idea of human-AI optimization. We can't be exclusively a kind of calming agent. But that's the role we accept.

The last thing I'll mention is that I really believe the CEO owns the culture of the company. CHROs can influence it, and we should. Part of what helps provide a sense of calm is predictability, and part of the CHRO's job is to make sure the organization is living up to its espoused culture standards.

Bryant: What are some strategies you've used to help drive transformation in organizations?

Cox: I have long used the "head, heart, and hands" approach. It's easy to remember, and I feel like it covers the waterfront. Head is about the logic and clarity of direction, where are we going and why do we need to do this? Second is heart, which is about the conviction and passion to change lives. And hands is about driving change with somebody versus to them. The goal is to enlist as many senior leaders as you can to help lead the change and have some meaningful participation in it.

Bryant: The role of the CHRO, given all the demands on their shoulders, seems overwhelming. How were you able to do it for all those years?

Cox: It's important to acknowledge that it was probably easier a few years ago than it is right now. But my approach was to always be clear about my purpose. And I wrote it down. I didn't show it to anybody, but I

kept it in my notebook and looked at it every day.

It was my North Star. It helped remind me to check whether I was spending my time on things that I was trying to be intentional about. You have to make sure your time matches the promise you're making to yourself. And if you're changing the list every year, then you're not shooting high enough.

Bryant: You've done a ton of mentoring and coaching over the years. What are the themes that come up most often?

Cox: The first one is just how lonely these C-suite jobs really are. Leaders need a judgment-free zone to explore ideas, confess their mistakes, and admit their uncertainty. That has come up a lot in the last three years that I've been doing coaching work since I stepped down from my last CHRO role at GE.

Another common theme is that people spend too much time talking about the gap between the team they need and the team they have. All of them move more slowly than they should to upgrade their team. And I tell people, "The longer you take to do that, the more you're deleveraging yourself."

Bryant: What were important early influences for you?

Cox: I grew up in southern West Virginia. My parents believed that getting a good education was the key to the American dream. So the family values were to be a good student, excel at everything you do, and go to college. They didn't get to go to college, so it was really important to them.

Where I grew up, the worst thing that somebody could say about anybody was that they were lazy. So you learned to be busy doing something, whether it was a paper route, bagging groceries, or mowing lawns. People there believed deeply in self-reliance. The message was that it's up to you, and you own it.

Bryant: What is the wisest thing you've ever read, heard, or said about leadership?

Cox: You have to create space and time to think, so you can check on yourself in terms of what's working and not working, and whether you're clear on the big things you're trying to accomplish.

There were times when I was working in Manhattan, and I would take the train out of Penn Station up to Boston on a Thursday night, check into a hotel, and spend most of Friday just writing and thinking. And then, around two o'clock, I would head back home to New York. However leaders at this level can make that happen, they need to create space to think.