

The Path to CHRO

7 Critical Qualities & Experiences Needed for Success

By IIC Partners: People & Culture Practice Group



The most common questions that come from executives who aspire to move into their first Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) role involve what it takes to be a strong and viable candidate.

We have a robust [People & Culture Practice Group](#) with consultants collaborating across 40 offices worldwide and, as a result, have had the opportunity to interact with many HR executives.

Every company has different perspectives and needs based on their business. However there are some critical competencies you must possess to be seriously considered for the top HR role at any organization.

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The Path to CHRO: 7 Critical Qualities & Experiences Needed for Success

1) Emotional Intelligence:

First and foremost, you need to have outstanding interpersonal and communication skills. However, that is not all. You must also be a great listener, and be trustworthy and authentic in your interactions with others.

“Tomorrow's most effective CHROs are those that take a “chronic curiosity” approach to engaging talent in the workplace. The most engaged workplaces are those driven by the employees themselves. Creating space and room to ask and learn from their talent will help inform a more relevant people agenda.” — Chris Kirkpatrick, Head of HR Canada, The Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson

2) Effective Leader:

Do you attract, retain and develop a team effectively? Do other colleagues want to work with and for you? Are you seen as a mentor to others? In addition, are you viewed as an effective leader across the company with your peers? Do other members in the C-Suite seek you out for advice and counsel?

“The most critical need is for the CHRO to have a connection with the CEO. They will need to influence, provide feedback and be a trusted advisor. That relationship will be the foundation to being successful.” — Dave Nocek, Senior VP and CHRO, Solenis

3) Driver of Change:

The head of HR typically is sought after to drive change across an organization; therefore, do you effectively communicate with others about the rationale for change and help influence others to “get on the change bus”? If you encounter resistance, do you know how to regroup and try to persuade others in a convincing manner why the change is critical for the organization? Are you persistent and positive in your approach?

“The most effective CHROs need to be “Relentless Optimists”. Today’s workplaces and adjacent markets are fraught with unprecedented social, economic and political challenges that require any Head of People to approach their role from a no problems, only solutions perspective.” — Chris Kirkpatrick, Head of HR Canada, The Janssen Pharmaceutical Companies of Johnson & Johnson

4) Board Experience:

Most likely, the head of HR will be engaged at the board level and be involved with the compensation committee of the board. Prior board experience is usually very helpful and often required.

“Executive presence and strong presentation skills are critical to connect with board members. An ability to engage with all stakeholders is necessary.” — Charlene Bergman, Managing Director and Partner, B. Riley Farber

5) Executive Compensation Expertise:

Although the new CHRO doesn't have to be an executive compensation expert, it is important to have a strong grounding in the basics to provide strategic direction in this area.

“Many times, you can count on your total rewards executive to support you, but you still should have a solid understanding of the fundamentals and how these pieces fit into a larger organizational picture and drive behavior.” — Sally Stetson, Co-Founder and Managing Partner, Salveson Stetson Group

6) Strategic:

It is important to have a broader view of the needs of the entire enterprise vs. a division or department. Will you have the capability of thinking and operating strategically to ensure you are aligned with the current and future needs of the business? At the same time, most HR executives still have to be open to rolling up their sleeves to get the work done. With the lean nature of organizations, this tends to be a necessity.

“It is critical that the CHRO will be able to get things done. They will need to balance the strategic/visionary along with executing and moving the ball forward to make things happen.” — Dave Nocek, Senior VP and CHRO, Solenis

7) Business Focus:

Think business first and human resources second. Understand the business, its trends and how you can utilize all of the necessary tools and levers to ensure the company is meeting or exceeding its expectations. Be intellectually curious about the business, ask thoughtful and insightful questions and understand what it takes for the business to thrive.

“A CHRO needs to make people decisions based upon the dynamics and needs of the business. Many times they may not be popular decisions but it is important to remove yourself from the emotional aspects of the employees to make the best choices for the business.” — Dave Nocek, Senior VP and CHRO, Solenis



Preparing for the CHRO Role

If you are seeking that top HR role but missing a few of these experiences, now is the time to expand your background:

- Ask to get involved in an executive compensation project or take a course to better understand the issues.
- Influence your current CHRO to allow you to join a board meeting or support a board committee project.
- Join a non-profit board to gain exposure to board protocols.
- Volunteer to lead change management programs and get involved with high-impact strategic initiatives.
- Accept speaking engagements.

All of these activities will be helpful in your professional development but will also broaden your connections and elevate your visibility with other leaders.

Finally, the best way to move into your first CHRO role is to ensure you are performing at your highest level in your current role. Your contributions will be recognized and, clearly, you'll be on your way to being considered for your first CHRO role.

PEOPLE & CULTURE PRACTICE GROUP

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