Congratulations on being offered the top seat, the chance to lead the HR team and serve as your company’s CHRO. Top HR leaders say that they spend nearly half of their time with senior business colleagues, serving as a strategic advisor and coach/confidant. Therefore, it is important for you to understand that your success as a CHRO will ultimately hinge on the effectiveness of the relationship you build with your new boss, the CEO, and your peers on the senior leadership team.

To get this top role, you have already demonstrated your HR expertise and business knowledge. You also understand that it will be critically important for you to run an efficient department that delivers the basic services well. But your expertise and operational leadership won’t enable you to serve as a true business partner and have the impact on the success of the company that you and your HR team desire if you aren’t able to cultivate a special and genuine relationship with your CEO. You need to put as much focus on building strong relationships with your boss, and also with senior peers, early in your tenure as you do on learning more about the business and formulating your HR agenda. This chapter offers a checklist of the steps for building a productive relationship with these key individuals and tips on traps to avoid.
Building Strong Relationships

Just because you’ve been named the CHRO does not mean your boss or other leaders will immediately look to confide in you and seek out your counsel on sensitive issues. You need to cultivate trust by developing rapport, build credibility by demonstrating your knowledge and business acumen, and consistently deliver results. To do this, you need to:

- Get to know your boss, senior colleagues, and your team
- Establish clear expectations
- Deliver on your commitments
- Demonstrate trust
- Be open and honest, and willing to have tough conversations
- Maintain a balanced perspective
- Regularly check-in and solicit feedback

Get to Know Each Other

In my experience, team members who know each other and have built a genuine respect for each other produce greater results and have more fun doing it. Relationships get built through personal connection, so you have to invest the time to get to know each leader. Even if you have been with the company for some time and had the chance to work with and know many or all members of the senior team, now that you are the CHRO, your role has changed and you need to develop a deeper and different connection than you have had in the past.

The easiest way to start forging a relationship with your boss or peers is to spend time talking about the business. Your objective in these discussions is to begin to learn how your boss and colleagues think and what matters to them. Solicit each leader’s perspective on what he or she sees as the business’s key challenges, as well as their view of the HR function and its effectiveness. These conversations will not only help you learn more about the business, they will also assist you in developing your thoughts on how to shape your HR team’s objectives and strategy.

In addition to talking about the business and HR, you should ask for advice on how each of your colleagues would like to work with you. And in talking with your peers, ask for their perspective...
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... on how they work with the CEO and each other. Make sure to also ask about what is going on in their personal lives and what hobbies and passions they have, and look for areas of mutual connection.

Getting to know your own team is another important source of information about how to build effective relationships with your new peers and boss. For starters, many of your direct reports can provide different views on how they work with these senior executives. They can outline what they think is working or not working about the approaches, and offer suggestions for improvement. If you are new to the company, your direct reports can give you insight on how your predecessor worked with the senior team, especially the CEO. Depending on the circumstances surrounding your appointment, you will want to handle these questions carefully. Talking with each member of your HR leadership team will also give you a clear picture of the key work they have under way and starts to build a relationship with each of them.

If the situation permits, spend time with your predecessor directly to learn his or her thoughts on how to work well with the CEO and other senior peers.

Establish Clear Expectations

In the early days of working together, it is especially important to have an explicit discussion with your boss about your mutual expectations of the scope of your role, your key deliverables, and the ways you would like to work together. This conversation is important, so take time to prepare your points so you are able to outline clearly what matters to you. If you have worked for the company prior to assuming the CHRO role, you will have a sense of the corporate culture relative to things like work style and communication cadence. Nevertheless, it is still important to make sure you are both aligned on how you will interact. Your appointment gives you both a special opportunity to reset past approaches and start your relationship out on the right footing. Here are some ideas of the types of points to cover:

Work Style

• Does your CEO prefer detailed briefings on issues or look for the headlines and assume you will cover the matter appropriately?
Is a verbal update sufficient, or are PowerPoint decks required to cover issues?

Is it acceptable to drop in on each other, or would the CEO prefer you meet at scheduled intervals unless there is an emergency?

How much time should you regularly spend together, and in what ways (for example, field visits or one-on-one sessions)?

Are you expected to have vetted certain issues with other colleagues before coming to the CEO with an issue, or does he or she want to be in the know first?

Does he or she expect you to cover certain items with everyone in regular staff meetings and other topics only with the two of you?

Communication Frequency and Approach

Does the CEO prefer face-to-face discussion, voice mail, or e-mail?

Are certain times off-limits to connect, except in the case of an emergency?

Should you check in with each other daily in the evenings or on weekends, even if you have no real issues to cover?

Are you expected to always participate in staff meetings, even if you are traveling or on vacation?

What is the norm around conversations? Is the desired approach to be direct and even confrontational if needed, or is everyone expected to talk issues through in a collegial and candid manner?

Is there a need to modulate the style used in certain forums such as town halls and leadership meetings?

Role Definition

What does serving as a strategic advisor mean to each of you?

What topics do you expect to be part of?

What does your CEO expect to regularly involve you in?

What aspects of the HR agenda does your CEO want to be involved in?

What things do you mutually agree will be held confidential, and what can or will be shared, and with whom?

How do you envision handling differing views or conflicts?
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Deliver on Your Commitments
Understanding what HR's key deliverables are and then ensuring that you and your team are getting them done as promised is table stakes to forging an effective relationship with all of your colleagues. In many cases when a new CHRO is appointed, something either was not working well, like a major transformational initiative in the business, or something needed to change following the appointment of a new CEO, for example. If either of these situations precipitated your appointment, it is critical that while you are assimilating to the new role, you stay focused on what needs to get done and drive action and output to avoid damaging both your team’s and your own credibility. Reviewing project time lines and the status of work against the key objectives for the year is important; suggest resetting due dates or refining project scope if needed.

Demonstrate Trust
Central to any good, sustained relationship, personal or professional, is trust. Your boss and other senior colleagues need to know that information shared with you will stay with you and not be passed on to others. As a CHRO, you are privy to sensitive information from many sources. Your effectiveness will be destroyed if people believe that you will share what they have told you in confidence. People also have to believe that you would never use what they have told you against them. One slip can harm your credibility and effectiveness.

Keeping the right partitions on information can be very tricky to manage if you learn about something the CEO or a colleague needs to know. In such a case, encourage the parties with the information to bring it forward to the appropriate people directly. If you have learned about something illegal, you have a duty to bring it forward immediately and must make it clear to the person who shared this information what your course of action will be.

It is important to make it clear to your CEO that you will never violate confidences, even if he or she insists you share what someone has told you. You also need to discuss any guidelines that are important to your CEO about how information the two of you discuss can be shared, and with whom, so there is no
misunderstanding. As a general rule, always assume nothing can be shared unless confirmed otherwise.

**Be Open and Honest**

Being open and honest in expressing your views goes hand in hand with demonstrating trust. The CEO and your colleagues need to understand that you will present information in a straightforward manner. Of course, you still need to temper how you present your points and when, depending on the issue. Sometimes this will require one-on-one sessions to have a difficult conversation. Here’s where your judgment on approach and setting will be critical. Everyone needs to know that you will put issues on the table and not hold back. Making this pledge also means that you must be sure to separate your opinion and perspective from the facts, and label it as such when speaking about an issue.

Courage is also needed to raise issues that could be sensitive or invite conflict. You are not doing your job if you simply choose to remain silent on a tough issue. You always have to be willing to speak up, no matter how uncomfortable it might be for you to do so. If the CEO or your colleagues are not receptive to having difficult conversations, then you will need to have a difficult talk with your boss about the situation. You will not be able to do your job effectively and serve your team or the company appropriately if you cannot be honest and open and identify the issues that need to be discussed.

**Maintain a Balanced Perspective**

A former boss once told me that my position played a special role as the organization’s conscience. As an HR professional, you probably have a well-developed intuition and appropriately rely on your instincts in assessing situations. You may have come to learn that despite this skill, you must constantly challenge yourself to ensure you are not presenting only one side of an issue. It takes time and probing to be sure you have looked at something from all sides, but you have to discipline yourself to operate this way. You also have to make sure to think corporately about what
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makes sense when balancing the needs of the overall business and the interests of its customers, employees, shareholders, and the community.

**Regularly Check In and Solicit Feedback**

Taking the time to periodically ask for feedback, especially from your boss, is important. Under our performance management programs, we always cite the importance of feedback, yet at more senior levels, especially at the top of the organization, feedback is often not freely given unless you specifically seek it out. As you and your boss begin to work closely together, you will likely both identify aspects to modify. Staying true to your pledge to operate in an open and honest manner, you should be sure to let your boss or colleagues know if any issue is impeding your relationship with any of them and invite them to do the same with you. Letting issues, no matter how minor, go unaddressed can slowly derail your effectiveness and sense of connection to your fellow senior leaders. Asking for input, especially in the early months, will allow you to calibrate your own sense of the relationships. It helps to role-model the type of connection you are working to build as a coach too.

**Traps to Avoid**

It takes time and steady focus to become a truly effective business partner, and doing this successfully can yield meaningful dividends for you personally and, more important, for the company and its employees. Nevertheless, you have to be aware of a few traps to avoid, or your relationship will be undone.

**Lose Perspective**

I have seen great HR leaders get derailed by their colleagues when they stop being part of the team and try to use their relationship with the CEO to put forward their own agenda. It is important to advance programs and decisions that you believe are the right ones for the company even if everyone else in the senior ranks
always agrees with what you are proposing. However, repeatedly disregarding colleagues’ views and using your relationship with the CEO to get your way too often can backfire. Your peers will look for ways to level the field, your relationship with them will deteriorate, and some may even look to actively undermine you and your team. You cannot be worried about being popular to discharge your duties well. But you do need to avoid putting forth your work at the cost of others.

**Advertise Your Importance**

If you have built a strong relationship, you will likely find yourself spending significant time with the CEO and having the type of influence you desire and need to do your job effectively. Dropping comments and making special effort to let others know how much time you are spending with the CEO, or bragging about your influence, however, is a surefire recipe for destroying your relationships with your peers and possibly also your boss. An HR professor I respect a great deal once shared that in his estimation, the best HR leaders are those who “lead from behind.” Your success is best spoken through the work you and your team deliver and the impact it makes on the business. Astute colleagues will see these results and will be keenly aware of the time you spend with the CEO and your influence in the organization.

**Favor the CEO**

It takes time to build relationships, so with all of the demands on your calendar, it is easy over time to focus most of your time on interactions with your boss. Ironically, your ability to be an effective advisor to your boss requires you to have a current and balanced view of what is happening across the business. Spending time regularly with each of your fellow senior leaders gives you a broader view of what is going on in their organizations and with them personally and in their interactions with each other and with their teams. If you do not put as much consistent effort and attention into the relationships you have with your peers, you will shortchange the value you provide to your boss.
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Lose External Focus

Your effectiveness in understanding the business and providing valuable advice and counsel also depends on the currency of your functional knowledge. Often CHROs can get caught up in building effective connections with their senior colleagues at the expense of staying abreast of external best practices and trends, and think they can rely solely on their team or outside consultants for this information. This is a big mistake as this information helps you better solve problems, develop HR strategies, and manage new risks. Your fellow leaders want and need to hear what other companies are thinking about when it comes to issues such as hiring, development, and reward strategies. They need to know about how others are tackling new regulations or laws that have an impact on labor costs. Although it takes time away from the office, you should regularly participate in external professional forums and develop good relationships with peers at other companies.

Conclusion

You have been appointed the CHRO and earned your seat at the table. To ensure you deliver on the expectations that go along with this responsibility and serve as a true business partner requires you to build effective relationships with your new boss, the CEO, and other senior colleagues. Foundational to forging real and lasting relationships is investing the time to get to know each other personally, as well as professionally; setting shared expectations and rules of engagement for how you will work together; and displaying trust and balance in how you conduct yourself with others. The road map for doing this is straightforward, but it requires focused effort at the start and the ongoing investment of your time to bring it to reality. The impact of doing it well can produce many benefits for your company overall and also be tremendously rewarding personally as you create strong connections with your colleagues.