



Strategic CHRO: Jorge Figueredo of McKesson on the "Honest Broker" Role

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For the next installment of our interview series with leaders who are transforming the role of the chief human resource officer, David Reimer, the CEO of The ExCo Group, and I sat down recently with Jorge L. Figueredo of McKesson Corporation. Since joining McKesson a decade ago, Figueredo, whose background includes leading a global operating unit with full P&L responsibility, has been instrumental in integrating new technologies into the HR function to help provide more strategic insights and make more data-driven decisions. Stay tuned for more interviews in coming weeks with other leaders in the HR field.

Q. One of the key roles for a CHRO is to manage relationships with the CEO, the board, and the executive team. How do you do that?

A. It's one of the most challenging parts of the job, and one that requires the most skill. If you earn the credibility and trust of the board and the CEO and the executive team, then they seek you out for counsel and advice, and to be part of the decision-making process.

But to do that, you have to be seen as an honest broker by everyone. If you are seen as working your own agenda or working the CEO's agenda or the board's agenda, it's going to

be very difficult for you to maintain that reputation. Frankly, it's one of the most critical roles that a CHRO can play. You have to build those relationships one by one.

Q. What would you say to a CHRO who called you looking for advice because they were frustrated that they weren't getting the strategic role they were promised?

A. I would tell them, first off, you're not alone. This is not a unique situation. Many CEOs say they want a strategic CHRO, but they often don't think through what it really means.

People should see this as an opportunity to educate and help your CEO to understand what it actually means. But whatever you do, do not whip out an article or book about it. You need to personalize the discussion to your company – not offer generic advice. Start by talking about the most important and critical people and organizational issues that you need to tackle as the CHRO in order to achieve the strategic goals.

Give them concrete examples of what kind of contributions you could make. Ask critical questions about the strategy, like what would it take from an executive talent, structural and organizational capability perspective to achieve the company's goals? That then gives you the opportunity to say that you can help with that. Then they'll likely say, "Oh, I never thought HR could do that."

I'd also say pick your spots. You want to demonstrate where you can make a difference, and that's got to be a match of a real pain point that the company needs to fix and your own experience, talents and competencies. Ask yourself, what's the real problem to be solved? Don't try to fix something you can't fix, and don't force fixes when there isn't really a significant problem.

Q. You had an interesting career path to the CHRO role, including an operating role as president of Liz Claiborne's international division. How did that better prepare you for your current role?

A. There were times when I was in those operating roles when I saw how our policies and some of the bureaucracy was getting in the way of making better decisions. So when I moved into HR, I hoped that I would bring more of a business practice and orientation to HR. For example, we're not here to invent solutions for problems that we think exist.

You've got to go out and do the market research as to what people feel are the greatest pain points or what improvements would make the biggest, most material change to our business. They may be describing an issue in certain terms, but you have to understand what they are trying to verbalize and to know what product or service would help them. You can't create a solution in a room with a bunch of other HR people. It's almost always done in a very collaborative, inclusive way with the business. It's about bringing some of the normal

business practices to HR.

Q. If you were giving advice to a room full of board directors from a wide range of companies, what would you tell them?

A. You need to look at your CHRO as a key advisor to you on all people and organization matters. Yes, you'll get that perspective from the CEO, and you'll even get it from other C-suite executives. But you need to think of the CHRO as your key advisor on what's actually happening in the organization.

The second thing is for directors to see the CHRO as a conduit for feedback and information to the CEO and to the leadership team. There are things that the board might want to communicate that are sometimes better coming from me. It's the same role that I play for our CEO. Sometimes it's better for me to have certain discussions with some of the leadership team members than for my CEO to do it directly or to reinforce his conversation.

The third thing I would say to the directors is to point out that companies often say that its people are its greatest assets. If that's the case, what mechanisms and controls do you have in place to make sure that you're getting data about how the talent and the organization is performing? The CHRO should be bringing that data discussion to you. This is not mysterious, and the analytics around HR are improving tremendously.

Q. You mentioned the role of "honest broker" in an organization. What's your best strategy for having conversations with people that might make them feel threatened?

A. I will say to them, "I need to share something with you. And I need you to hear me out and then I'm happy to answer any question. It's not going to be an easy conversation, but I'm here to support you. I want you to understand why I'm here and what needs to be achieved. And if you respond in the right way and address this, we're going to get through this. If you don't, then we may not."

I always try to make it their decision, and I want them to feel accountable. I don't want the monkey on my back. The monkey's got to be on their back. I want them to feel empowered to be accountable and I want them to understand the facts.

Q. What were some key leadership lessons over the course of your life?

A. I got a battlefield promotion at Liz Claiborne to become the head of HR at 33 years old. Shortly after I moved into that role, the CEO left, and the new CEO looked at me and said, "Why should I keep you in the job? You're too young and you don't know what you're doing." I convinced him to at least give me a shot. But six months later, I walked into his office and said, "I'm failing. You were right and you should kick me out of here." And he

said, "It's about time you came in here and admitted you were failing. Everybody else knows it."

Ultimately, he gave me a second chance, but made clear that I better start doing a lot better than I was doing. So we restructured the department, I hired new people, and the changes were a great success. The lesson was about resilience, and learning to trust myself.

I'm also an immigrant from Cuba. I came to the United States when I was three weeks old. My mom and dad fled Castro, and their big message was that the United States of America is the greatest country in the world. They said, "There's so much opportunity here. We brought you here to be the best you could ever be." And I learned a lot from my mom and my dad about how to be successful in a foreign culture, in a foreign language, and I watched them both take leadership positions.

I also remember when I was very young, about nine or ten years old, and I said to my mother, "You know, Mom, I think I want to become President of the United States." And she looked at me and said, "Well, of course. If that's what you want to do, that's what you do." I remember her expression. It was like she was mystified that I would even question why I couldn't be the President of the United States.

I said, "Because it's crazy, Mami." She goes, "No it's not. If you really believe that you can be the President of the United States, then go be the President of the United States. What's stopping you?" But it came from her own sense of optimism and her own deep motivation to bring her children to the United States. They sacrificed a lot to come here, and they wanted the best for their children. So if a child says to them, "Well, I can't do something," they're going to say, "No, you can."