



Matt Schuyler, Chief Administrative Officer, Hilton



Strategic CHRO

Conversations with leaders who are transforming the world of HR.

"You Have To Be A Master Of Action, An Agent Of Change, And A Collaborator."

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***Matt Schuyler**, who was promoted in October from chief human resources officer to a broader role of chief administrative officer at **Hilton**, shared his key leadership lessons with me and my colleague, **David Reimer**, CEO of **The ExCo Group**.*

Reimer: How did you get into HR in the first place?

Schuyler: I grew up in the farmlands of Pennsylvania and went to Penn State University. A year into my curriculum, I needed to figure out my major. I knew business was my primary interest, and I thought that if I'm going to be in business, I better learn the language of business, and so I decided to major in accounting.

I ended up at Price Waterhouse, starting out as an auditor. In that role, I realized that the most talked about but probably least-leveraged aspect of business was the people. A lot of companies say that their most important asset is their people. And yet when you really looked at how they were operationalizing that, there was a big gap.

And thus was born my interest in the next chapter of my career. I ended up in the global HR practice at PriceWaterhouseCoopers and then promptly exited after making partner because I wanted to see a broader panorama outside of professional services.

Bryant: What have you learned in the CHRO role? What would you tell your younger self when he was first stepping into the job?

Schuyler: What I'd tell my younger self is to push harder and faster. We've achieved great success in the companies that I've worked for. They've all been great people companies, and it took years to build out the people functionality to achieve the operational success that we ultimately had. If I knew then what I know now, I would be even more of a zealot to convince the rest of the company that HR is the fulcrum upon which success rests.

Reimer: What is fixed and what is variable in how you define succeeding in this role?

Schuyler: I'm a business leader who happens to specialize in HR. You have to show up as a problem-solver relative to the needs of the business, and from there, the role becomes super vast. In an HR capacity, you have to be a master of action, an agent of change, and a collaborator because you know the matrix of the organization better than anyone.

A lot of people enter the role thinking they're going to be a strategist. That's great, because strategy is important. You've got to see around corners to anticipate what's coming next. But if you can't get things done and if you can't master the incremental actions to build the company, brick by brick, then you're not going to be successful in these roles. It's a blend.

You have to be the master of action and strategist of change.

Bryant: You were recently named chief administrative officer of Hilton. Talk about that shift, and how the CHRO role prepared you for it.

Schuyler: One of the great benefits of being a CHRO is that you see every aspect of the company from a unique vantage point of the talent within the organizational structures. So you know where all the people are and what they're assigned to be working on, which is the physical manifestation of the business.

The way we're looking at this chief administrative officer construct is to be an integrator — to essentially look out over our key strategic priorities and make sure that the dots are getting connected, and then encourage and enable the organization to get those done more efficiently and effectively.

The role is really meant to be an enabler. In many ways, it's similar to the remit of the CHRO as business enabler, problem solver, and leverage creator as it relates to plugging the gaps of where our key strategic priorities are not being met.

Reimer: The CHRO holds a unique position on the leadership team. What's your framework for thinking about that?

Schuyler: Probably the single biggest challenge that HR practitioners face is this notion of being aligned with the CEO and the C-suite and yet influencing the executive cadre to grow and to develop. That can at times feel threatening because we also control the pay and performance management and recognition process.

HR practitioners have to be able to decompress the inherent fear that people have of the function and its power and to showcase yourself as an enabler, a helper, a coach, a sponsor and an ally, even when you might have to lead a reduction-in-force effort or an exit strategy for an executive or a team.

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balance.

That apothecary scale is really tough to balance. I don't think we're ever done learning as HR practitioners, and this is the one area where you're really never done learning how to perfect that art. And it is an art, rather than a prescription. Every situation is different. Every aspect requires you to think about the nuance.

My advice to HR practitioners is to pay careful attention to this balancing act, communicate thoroughly and share context, and make sure that you're on the same page as the leadership team with respect to the actions you must take. In some ways, I'd say the how is more important than the what when it comes to these types of endeavors.

I can look back on a career and say there have been plenty of times where I had that balance off and I should have spent more time sharing the context. And then there were times when I got it right and we were super sensitive to all the nuances of a tough situation. It's probably the most rewarding aspect of the job when it's done right, and it's probably the most frustrating aspect of the job when you are less successful.

Bryant: How do you think about planning and performance right now, given all the disruption and uncertainty this year?

Schuyler: What we've attempted to do, and I think we're well positioned to see this through, is to right-size our workforce to weather the storm and reward those who remain in as normal a fashion as possible.

So there is a steadfast commitment to wanting to reward people for their hard work, even though metrics are rendered completely ridiculous by the year we've had. But providing some level of normalcy in a sea of change and chaos is an important retention mechanism. It provides a big exhale moment for leaders and for team members because it's just one less thing to worry about.

We also set new metrics in the form of six- to nine-month key strategic priorities. At the time, we didn't know what the financials were going to look like, but we did have some

priorities we wanted everyone to work on. And we're measuring against them literally weekly to give people mile markers along the journey.

Reimer: If you were advising other companies on building a robust development and succession plan during this period, what would be the two or three guiding principles?

Schuyler: Companies are looking at their talent through the lens of a crisis now. There's that Warren Buffet expression, "Only when the tide goes out do you discover who's been swimming naked." We're facing that. I look at our organization and ask, do we have enough of the right leaders to run the organization into perpetuity?

It seems counterintuitive, but planning and investing and obsessing over the waves of talent who will succeed in your organization has never been more important. And the reason that sounds counterintuitive is because we're all fighting a crisis, and so our attention is going to the company surviving.

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the CEO and the management team.*

Do we really have time and appetite to be thinking about succession planning and development plans to bridge the gaps? We have to force ourselves to do it. It's got to be tantamount to Job #1 of a board, the CEO and the management team right now.

A side note on all this is that at some point this virtual existence is going to end and people will be coming back to the office. But I see a lot of leaders locking into their remoteness right now. That's going to cause some turnover, both induced by the company and by the executives getting accustomed to a lifestyle in a remote environment that just won't work when there's the siren call to get back to work. That's causing us to be even more ready for succession than we would have normally been.

Bryant: What are the X-factors that you're looking for in your talent pipeline, particularly now?

Schuyler: We always look for selfless, steady, action-oriented leaders who are unflappable and who shine bright regardless of the challenge given to them. In my experience of nearly 30 years in HR, selfless people get further in the long run than selfish people who ultimately crash and burn at some juncture. And that phenomenon is exacerbated in a time of crisis.

Reimer: Over the course of your career, what has been a key leadership lesson for you?

Schuyler: In a professional services firm like Price Waterhouse, it's an up-or-out environment. Around year 11 or 12, you know it's time for consideration for partnership, which is the pinnacle. In the spring of that twelfth year for me, I got a call from my boss who was based in London, and he said, "Can you fly over to London to see me tomorrow?"

I arrived early the next morning, and he said, "Let's go grab a pint." And sure enough, the pubs were open at 8:30 in the morning. So we sat down and he said, "I have some news for you. You didn't make it." This was devastating because I'd spent the better part of twelve years leading up to this moment, and in the previous year I had accomplished all my objectives.

But then he said, "The good news is that it's a 'not now,' not a 'no never, ever.'" And here's the lesson he shared: "We were not measuring you on the 'what.' We were measuring you on the 'how,' and you got more done than we've ever seen anybody get done, so you've checked the 'what' box. On the 'how,' you created some waves along the journey because you were such a zealot in getting a lot done. So you have a do-over. Take this next year, focus on the how, not the what." The next year I made partner and I try to remember that lesson every day when I come to work.

Bryant: What were important early influences for you when you were growing up in the farmlands of Pennsylvania?

Schuyler: Growing up in that part of the country, there was a real work ethic and selflessness. It didn't matter who got the credit. What mattered was that you worked together to accomplish the objectives. I carry that lesson with me in my everyday dealings around here.

I really don't care about getting credit for anything. What I care about is the journey and accomplishing our objectives, and making sure we are living our values. I'm glad I grew up in that kind of environment, because learning those lessons later in life would have been harder.