

# From General Manager to CHRO

The stories of five people-minded business leaders who moved to the top human resources role by happenstance and led a radical reinvention of HR in their company.

By Antoine Tirard and Claire Harbour



In 2005, Fast Company published the now famous article “Why We Hate HR”. Echoing one of the popular workplace beliefs, the authors were asking why does human resources do such a bad job — and how can it be fixed? In the interim, however, we have witnessed positive changes, with some big corporations starting to think differently about what they wanted from their HR departments and their chief HR officers (CHROs). One hallmark of the new thinking about HR is that it should be led by someone whose experience

more closely connects them to the strategy and operations of the overall business. As a result, an increasing number of companies have appointed CHROs coming from business functions. Yet, the debate remains open whether this novel practice is a wise strategy. As experts in career and talent management, we were intrigued and set out to bring some light to this question. We met five leaders who came from diverse backgrounds in Marketing, Sales, R&D, Engineering, Legal, General Management and all made the jump to the top HR role. The compelling nature of these

stories might convince you that the debate should no longer be going on, but we encourage you to see both sides, and consider also that sometimes there are just people who are “in the right place, at the right time”, who have the appropriate mix of skills and abilities, even if derived from a broader range of experiences. We will let you judge for yourselves.

### Krishna: Engineering wellness and engagement at Flipkart

Where Krishna grew up, in Southern India, the most esteemed careers to pursue were traditionally engineering, medicine and chartered accountancy. So, having embarked on a degree in engineering, and realized he hated the confines of “boxed” learning, in true Indian style, he dropped out after six months, which was unheard of in his community. Instead he initially pursued the loftier and more abstract discipline of pure mathematics – perhaps the first indication that Krishna was not just all about the practical side.

The broadening of horizons continued with a liberal arts degree in a small college in the US, where Krishna began to feel a seminal shift in who he was and what he was pursuing. Being pushed to explore a broad variety of disciplines gave him range and stimulation, though he chose to major in Computer Science through pragmatism. Nevertheless, holistic thinking remained uppermost in his mind, as Krishna built the first seven years of his tech career in Silicon Valley, experiencing dotcom booms and busts, startups and large companies.

He returned to India to take up engineering roles in several companies including Yahoo! while additionally taking on some long-cherished social activities. Then in 2012, Krishna was attracted to a role at India’s leading e-commerce site, Flipkart, which was in early stage growth. He was particularly excited by the vision and culture of the organization, not to mention the opportunity to return to Bangalore.

Four years in, having held a number of increasingly responsible roles in the engineering function of the organization, Krishna felt less inspired with the departure

Name	Krishna Raghavan	
Current role	Chief People Officer at Flipkart	
Previous roles	CTO, Engineering in various startups and tech companies	
Nationality	Indian	
Education	BS Mathematics, Computer Science	

from the strong cultural heritage and DNA the company had built for itself. This led to discussions with the founders, and an elegant, amicable exit from the company. However, Krishna stayed in touch for a few years, describing Flipkart as his “labor of love”, while pursuing a role as CTO elsewhere.

Over time, things evolved at the top of the company. Several key figures were invited to return to Flipkart, including Krishna who did it with almost no hesitation, feeling that he could pick up where he had left off. He felt connected with the company, and in deep communication with its people, having spent so long in the engine room. The challenge now was that he was asked to take on a role leading the Supply Chain Technology function of the business – a new departure, but one which he tackled with his usual curiosity and thirst for learning.

As Krishna learned, and invested in his people, structuring and nurturing them, enabling all to reach their potential, he found himself accelerating his connection with the HR function. In collaboration, they built solutions to optimize performance, development, rewards and more.

During a Leadership Development program, Krishna was encouraged to get into coaching, and his reflection on how to become the best leader possible drew him closer and closer to the People function. This period gave him the space and courage to pursue his “dream to invest in people 110%.” Serendipity came along in the form of the departure of the then Head of HR, and Krishna ended up in the role, backed up by

the opinions of many, who had wondered and wished him into that role over the previous few years.

The context of this transition is easy to understand. Flipkart, on the one hand, has always had a culture of encouraging each individual to flourish and pursue a path that includes shifts and growth. And Krishna, on the other, had always been particularly focused on the human aspect of whatever his business had been.

Krishna took the Chief People Officer full-time role only in April 2020. Not surprisingly the initial focus has been on setting priorities around safety for Flipkart’s frontline workers, as they served not only company but country in distributing key goods. He tuned in and listened deeply, using his prior experience of this part of the company to take care of physical, mental and emotional wellbeing, while inspiring and caring.

Previous deep dives into the human side of the business have served Krishna well. They have allowed him to be speedy and authentic in setting up employee wellness and engagement programs that have impact and credibility, and he constantly sports a “beginner’s mindset”. He is conscious of the need to create and drive a three-year plan which will push the People function higher up the strategic priorities, and to embark on a one year “walk” that gets him and his team towards that destination.

While ensuring that sound metrics are in place for everything from performance to development, Krishna is also on a mission to make Flipkart a best-in-class employee experience destination. His fundamental desire to take care of people and allow them to flourish to the highest possible level is given “ample room for expression in this environment.”

The challenges to tackle next include the paradox of an unrelenting focus on the consumer in the business with the progress to a singular focus on the people in the organization, the need to transform Flipkart into an “academy organization” which attracts the brightest and the best, and a destination for career crafting. And Krishna knows that this is

Name

Isabelle Esser

Current role

Chief Human Resources Officer at Barry Callebaut Group

Previous roles

Various Research and Development at Unilever

Nationality

Belgian

Education

PhD Chemistry, MEng Civil Engineering



his own destination. He has found the role in which his desire to care and nurture can be used to create more value, whether in creating a “continuous listening” culture, where action can be taken earlier, or in establishing a long-term, next-level leadership program for a cadre of 150 promising Hi-Pos. Krishna’s belief that constant reinvention is crucial will support their development, and has contributed to his own success. He is convinced that the People function should be the most important one in any organization and he is gaining momentum.

### Isabelle: The eclectic R&D leader on a mission to transform Barry Callebaut HR

From the outset, Isabelle was a curious explorer. She gained her first work experiences at ICI, Villeroy & Boch and others while studying engineering to PhD level, and then took a fast-track path at Unilever, starting in a Research role.

Early on, Isabelle could observe that deep science did not set her alight. A shift to product development made her realize how much she thrived in bringing technology and creating products that could impact people’s lives. She became increasingly interested in how to understand people’s actual needs and to collaborate across the functions of the company to solve everyday problems. In her world, people mattered as much as products.

A series of promotions across geographies and product categories meant increasing responsibility for people and teams. At her peak, Isabelle had

over 2,000 of them, as Vice President for R&D Europe, CEE and Russia, responsible for all R&D centers and facilities in that region, across Unilever's Foods and Home & Personal Care businesses. She accurately but tentatively described it as "a glorified HR job!" However she was also discovering the importance of business context and understanding the deliverables in creating value.

Moving into Unilever's Foods division, Isabelle met Antoine de Saint-Affrique, who led this part of the business. Together, they tackled the issues of a challenged business segment. She found herself involved in restructurings, and realized that science and technology could no longer be kept entirely in house. Her systems thinking came into play and she conceived eco-systems of varied stakeholders, both internal and external, that made sense in the new paradigm.

In her final role at Unilever, Isabelle started to build an innovation center — another eco-system in which diverse internal and external stakeholders could engage. At the same time she began talking to headhunters. One of them asked her "Have you considered HR?" She was shocked at first, but the idea took root. This aligned brilliantly with her underlying philosophy of having People "at the heart of the business." Several other discussions ensued around various opportunities but none of these reached closure. However, they reinforced Isabelle's aspiration to stay eclectic, use her business knowledge and continue to learn.

When she got the call from Antoine de Saint-Affrique, her former boss, now CEO of chocolate manufacturer, Barry Callebaut, who expressed the need for bringing HR closer to the business, Isabelle was attracted, not only because she trusted the person, but also because she could see that this was a true challenge in both leadership and value creation. Despite the leap from a global B2C behemoth to a smaller B2B partly family-owned company, Isabelle relished the chance, once again, to have an impact. However, she admits that "without Antoine being there, I would never have done it."

The expectation was that Isabelle bring a

## 7 Reasons Why a CEO Should Appoint a CHRO with no HR Background

1. Their previous business experience gives them legitimacy and credibility with a wide range of stakeholders
2. They bring a business angle to the HR function and align it to better support the business
3. They don't mind ruffling feathers, they dare to bring big change in the HR function, simplifying or retiring prior practices or processes
4. They avoid "HR for HR's sake", focusing on crucial activities that serve for HR's the business; they push HR teams to a higher level of impact and help them gain or regain pride
5. They develop people programs that have impact, making them relevant, palatable and manageable
6. They use influence, authority and vision to build or sustain connections with the CEO and the board
7. When promoted from within, they become natural "culture carriers" and they role model the opportunity to pursue a career path that includes shifts and growth

business angle to the HR function, and she built her credibility thanks to this. The function was not well perceived within the business, but she began, with the CEO's blessing, by going out to the furthest extremities of the supply chain, talking to dairies and cocoa producers in Africa, and chocolate making around the world often visiting remote facilities where HR people had rarely, been. She asked a lot of fundamental questions and looked for simple answers, that were all driving to be "in service of the business." Her team looked on, somewhat surprised, as she set a clear direction to the function.

While fixing some practical problems simply and quickly, Isabelle continued to explore how she could embed the HR function within the business. She spent a full six months at the outset, visiting, questioning, and above all listening. She wanted to understand what made the organization "tick", and to avoid HR for HR's sake, focusing on "what is it crucial that we do?" Metaphors arose, like the idea of "looking under the bonnet", and "the swan, who floats beautifully at the surface, but pedaling like mad under the water." The idea was to create images that would speak universally, and gather everyone around the vision and next steps.

Whereas, the HR function had been used as scapegoat for more or less every problem in the

company, now, under Isabelle’s leadership, the team members began to take pride in their roles. Every action needed to be “simple, focused and impactful”. Isabelle’s approach was to put the People strategy at the center of the business, and the HR function as the mechanism that delivered it.

The transformation journey is by no means over, but Isabelle’s legitimacy as a visionary who fundamentally understands business drivers allows her to progress, grounded and simple. While her credibility has been crucial, her lack of familiarity with HR has also served her, as she has been able to concentrate on the big picture, relying on the deep expertise of her team, and also to “not see the problems” associated with a range of ideas and initiatives, just plowing on through, and building a network of stakeholders within the company.

What have been the challenges? “Building trust with the Board and the Executive Committee, especially the company’s ‘lifers’. Without their buy-in, nothing can move forward.” Isabelle has also made sure to be “slow and steady”, not revolutionizing everything in one fell swoop. She has really enjoyed her journey so far, and the trust of the team, as this is a huge shift for her and them on every front.

Perhaps the enduring image we have of Isabelle is of “the lady who never gets out of the factory”, who relishes the chance to understand the business and the people who make it a reality. She constantly makes deep dives into the guts of the company, in an attempt to understand grass roots needs, keep things simple, and serve. She strongly recommends that any HR neophyte in a similar position take the same approach.

Will she go back to R&D? “I find my current role so engrossing. We are just getting started and there is so much to do. However, I miss tech and science, as solutions to everyday needs, so I will fulfill that need via board roles, or volunteering.” Whatever, this is someone committed to driving change humbly, fully and generously, and we sense the sky may be the limit to her career.

Name

Loren I. Shuster

Current role

Chief People Officer  
& Head of Corporate  
Affairs at LEGO Group

Previous roles

General Management, Marketing in  
tech and consumer companies

Nationality

Canadian

Education

MBA, Masters Consulting and Coaching,  
BCom



## Loren: Using commercial instinct to bring HR back to the playing field at LEGO

Although Loren became a Chief People Officer (CPO) less than three years ago, the seed was planted further back than that, when he accidentally “discovered” personal development while on a business trip to Australia. He had, until then, been “ignorant and unappreciative of various wellness modalities such as mindfulness”, but from that moment on, he pursued his own growth insatiably. However, the focus on development was at a personal level, and it was only when he was offered his first general management role, at Nokia Taiwan, five years later, that he began to attempt to introduce some of his learning into a work context “without scaring them off.” From there, he pursued a number of coach certifications, leadership programs, a second Masters in Organizational Psychology and more, as he spread his learning to others.

By 2011, when he was at Google in Asia, Loren found himself in an environment that was ahead of the curve in the people development area. He was given time to create his office’s Mindfulness Program, as well as setting up a coaching program, supported and encouraged by the highly reputed People leader at the company, Laszlo Bock. As a result of this positive and pioneering environment, Loren began an inner debate: would he have more impact if he were to be working

inside HR? Or as a “conscious leader”? He might well have made the transition to the People function at Google, if he had not been headhunted by LEGO.

Since Loren was not particularly seeking other opportunities, he was what is known as a “passive” candidate, and this allowed him to be open and authentic in his interview with the CEO and owner. He was being considered for a commercial leadership role, and was even asked whether he would be eyeing the CEO role, but found himself answering “not necessarily, but if you had a CHRO position, I’d be interested in that!” As the conversation evolved, the subject was more and more oriented towards a holistic approach to business, in which people and talent were central.

Having returned to the academic arena, to gain some more credentials in organizational psychology, Loren began his time at LEGO relishing the opportunity to be once again in a global role, but faced with massive organizational and executive change. A series of shifts, exits and dominos falling led to him being appointed Chief People Officer in 2017, with a few months before going into action. These months gave him the time to observe all the opportunities for improvement, without actually being stuck inside. The commercial role he had held gave him credibility and legitimacy both with the board and the staff.

As a result of all the change and the inherent weaknesses in the People environment at LEGO, Loren needed to go into immediate “resuscitation” mode. As he says, he “had to get the patient out of the ICU and back to the playing field.” Much of his success came from simplifying and “retiring” prior thought and process. He tackled the reward system, showcasing the idea that “we are all in this together.” He simplified core HR practices, by breaking down deeply-held beliefs about institutionalized annual practices: he ruthlessly weeded out many such practices, making reviews, for example, much more personal.

A new leadership model emerged, thanks to his work, and despite the pain to some of losing the thirty or so “leadership artefacts” that were



Lego headquarters

lying around the various parts of the company. He took a bottom-up approach, creating a highly diverse working group, instructing them “You tell us!” The result was a simple, uniquely LEGO, durable model called “The Leadership Playground”, aimed at every member of the company, and a thousand or so “Playground Builders” were responsible for making a grass roots movement to introduce and implement the model.

Was there resistance along the way? “Of course! Half the people thought ‘Who the hell is this guy? Is he being punished in this role?’ I was only able to pull this off because I had the experience of the heart of the business from the CCO role. Loren was also perceived initially by his team as “too fast and demanding”, but he was so prepared to make the changes, having been on the sidelines for years before he made the change, that he was confident in ruffling feathers. The CEO says often that “it is thanks to Loren’s commercial instinct in the CPO role that is supporting the mission to mobilize potential to reach out to more children.”

Now that it has been a few years, the whole company is more aligned, and understands that “if HR wants a seat at the table, they have to be ‘in the business’ on a daily basis, and not lagging behind.”

More recently, Loren has been given additional responsibility for corporate affairs, and is now “responsible for LEGO’s People Promise and Planet Promise.” Would he be aiming for the CEO role now? Well, no, because “I spend more time doing things that energize me now, than I would as CEO. I have a healthy, authentic relationship with the current CEO, and I have an excellent equilibrium between influence,

authority, vision and execution.” Loren is happier out of the limelight, pursuing his ultimate goal of enabling the organization to be even more conscious and improving the world. He is “in his sweet spot – negotiating, influencing, coaching and nurturing others to be more purposeful in their orientation towards the world.”

### Jenni: A big picture, eloquent lawyer helps Arup flourish and unlock people’s potential

Jenni fell into the study of Law somewhat haphazardly, but was the first youngster ever from her state school in Scotland to be accepted at Oxford. Here, she followed the lead of most graduating students, into a prominent City law firm. Several years of very successful work at Linklaters in M&A law ensued, but she was frustrated by not being “able to see the end of the story.” A Chief of Staff role, working for a legendary senior partner, Tony Angel, opened the door for an MBA sponsored by the firm. Although Jenni did not “find herself” in the manner which she had hoped, she did manage to define two clear themes that she loved. These were big picture strategic thinking, coupled with making complex things simple, and how to unlock people’s potential.

Post MBA, sensing that running a business was one missing element from her range, Jenni took on a role as COO of one of the divisions at Linklaters, becoming the first non-former accountant to be “allowed” to have the role. At this time she also got her first taste of coaching, setting up a coaching function in the firm, as well as doing a certification herself.

After ten years at Linklaters, Jenni got “to the end of the road”, planning to become an independent coach and consultant. A couple of substantial projects easily came her way, but she was less fond of the financial and family pressures of freelance life. This is where serendipity swept in. A friend passed her a job description for a Head of People at CMS, another large law firm. Despite the closing date having passed, Jenni found a way to convince them to consider her and then got the job. This was a huge leap in terms of responsibility

Name

Jenni Emery

Current role

Global People Leader  
at Arup Group

Previous roles

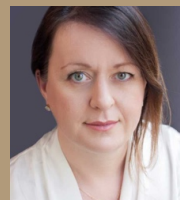
Corporate Law, M&A,  
Strategy in law firms

Nationality

British

Education

MA Law, MBA



and stature. She enjoyed the stretch, using a coach to support her as she grew, and got her teeth into challenges like performance management, competency frameworks and “other themes that were hot at the time.” Also enjoyable was the challenge of fitting in with the more traditional HR people, including the head of HR, to whom she was smart enough to give space to use her expertise, and also to communicate clearly “I’m not here to do or take away your job.”

A couple of years into her work at CMS, Jenni was called upon to take a lead in the acquisition of a Scottish law firm. Her motivation was sky-high as she rediscovered the world of M&A, but this time with vested interests and a clearer recognition of how people and culture play such an important role in a merger. This role, followed by a further, even larger merger, shifted Jenni’s responsibilities toward Strategy. This was when it became clear to her that what she loves is constant change and setting the scene for successful implementation.

More weird coincidences then showed up in Jenni’s life. As she was contemplating writing a book, the engineering consulting firm, Arup, was cited in a lecture Jenni attended as being exemplary in diversity and inclusion matters, and her curiosity was piqued. The very next day, a headhunter called, on the lookout for candidates for Arup’s new Head of People. After hesitation, debate and negotiation, Jenni was able to orchestrate her way into being able to write her book, manage her way gently and transparently out of her current role and into

Arup, all on her own terms. She was having her cake and eating it.

Assimilation into the almost cult-like environment of Arup has not been easy, but it has been hugely rewarding. For Jenni, the balance between fitting in and being able to challenge the norms has been tough, but she has found a way to master the vernacular, and build trust step by step. She achieved this by spending her first 100 days travelling the world, asking questions and listening, changing course as necessary, and starting to build a picture. By the end of 2019, she was beginning to take her first strategic steps at the firm, pulling it back together to a more global vision and operation, from the federated regional model that had prevailed. She was particularly appreciated for her ability to behave like a “professional services” person, despite not being an engineer or architect, and for her eloquence and capacity to win over and convince.

And then came COVID19! In this unexpected time, Jenni has taken a more directive role than she might have imagined, setting things up for safety, wellbeing and more. Additionally, the necessary shift the firm has made to that of playing a role in shaping and defining “the new normal” for workplaces has given her an opportunity to contribute her thinking to the strategy and leadership required in this area, both within Arup and beyond. She is already straying “outside the lines” of the People role, and that is welcomed on both sides. Her skills augment and complement those that are native to Arup, and she admits, conversely, to having learnt to be more data-driven than before, using the environment to push her to keep on developing.

Even more recently, Black Lives Matter came onto the horizon, and Jenni has co-created a summit on race for the summer, and aims to make the conversation not just firm-, but also sector-wide.

With current emerging subjects, Jenni is far from bored, whereas she recognizes that typically her interest level fades three years in. What she imagines next is that as she reaches that landmark with Arup, she will be able to continue to mold her own role, so as to stay

Name

Brad Porteus

HR role (Apr 2016 - Feb 2020)

Global Chief People Officer at OLX Group

Previous roles

General Management, Marketing in various companies

Nationality

American

Education

MBA, BA Economics



with a firm that she truly loves. We don't doubt her ability to shape that up for herself.

### Brad: Enjoying the stretch and the ride of repositioning HR as the backbone of OLX Group

“Life was passing me by and it was time.” From the San Francisco Bay Area and with twenty years of career in Silicon Valley, Brad had a lurking sense of adventure, which he finally acted on in January 2010. He resigned from his role as CMO of Elance, flew to Singapore to get a job, and came home 11 days later with an offer to move his family and embark on a completely new life. Friends and colleagues struggled to comprehend what he was doing, while he and his wife saw it as “getting out of the suffocating myopia of the area”, and an opportunity to go far outside their comfort zone.

Brad's initial overseas role as CMO in a venture-backed start-up in Singapore got him hooked on the global working environment. That led to a larger role at Naspers Limited, as General Manager of eCommerce for Southeast Asia. Sitting side-by-side with regional entrepreneurs and helping steer a portfolio of organizations in states of constant change was exhilarating. But arms-length coaching ultimately fell flat, with the realization that he is “happiest in the cockpit turning the dials”, as opposed to calling in from the control tower. So, when given an opportunity, he leapt to lead operations as General Manager for Southeast Asia for Naspers' OLX Group classifieds unit in 2013.

Two years later, Brad was given a big surprise.



His boss, CEO of OLX Group, summoned him to breakfast, to drop the bomb that he had a “new idea” for Brad – to lead HR globally for the group as Global Chief People Officer. Brad was incredulous. “But I have no experience in HR”, he protested, wondering if the new assignment out of general management and into a global function was some sort of “consolation prize.” Despite self-doubts stemming from lack of experience in HR, he was ultimately comforted by the assurance from his CEO: “Don’t worry. You know the business side. On the HR side, you’ll figure it out.”

Knowing that management had his back, and that a team of HR experts were available through the Naspers network, Brad was “intrigued and flattered enough to give it a try.” After all, he realized his favorite parts of general management were the people topics such as hiring great talent, building culture, aligning around vision and goals, and leading high-performance teams.

Once in the role, Brad was able to use his strength in business operations and his people skills in influencing, to start to shift the direction of the HR function. The initial first few months involved a large amount and wide range of judgement calls on a seemingly endless backlog of one-off problems that required immediate resolution. This rapidly built his knowledge and confidence in getting his feet under him in building the knowledge he previously lacked.

Brad built trust in the stakeholders around him, by showing that what he was introducing was both business-oriented yet pragmatic to the way the company worked. Managing HR across 15 time zones, a wide range of teams, 20 brands, and 25 countries, he was able to lead through finding a balance between freedom and control for the teams he directly and indirectly managed. He used to his advantage “I’m not an expert” to challenge convention and introduce innovation, avoiding pushback by deliberately avoiding usurping anyone’s expertise. He gradually introduced new solutions for calibrating processes, thinking and behaviors across the group, where once it had been a free-for-all. He introduced common sense



OLX Team in Bosnia

approaches, while recognizing them as being imperfect, such as unifying hiring principles to ensure global alignment on standards, while allowing local teams to execute embracing the local norms required for the local market conditions.

As traction grew, Brad found currency in toeing the line between avoiding being seen as the purveyor of “corporate bullshit” and bringing genuinely valuable innovations. The fact that he “came from the business” allowed him to disrupt, but also gave him a legitimate leg to stand on.

In his fourth year in the role, in late 2019 Brad brought into the company a global HR leader with deep industry credentials and capabilities. She quickly became his ideal successor, and opportunistically in early 2020 Brad found the perfect time, context and moment to elevate the HR function under her leadership, while himself side-stepping into a more familiar marketing role as Global CMO for the group. “It felt like solving a really complex Rubik’s Cube in one turn. It was perfect timing for her, for me, and for the company. I’ve long believed careers are about a sequence of roles, and now it’s on to the next one.”

Reflecting on his contribution as HR leader, Brad is proud to have proactively pushed his company to shift from being strategy and marketing-driven to more product and customer-driven. “I was intentional in efforts made around what we measure, whom we hire, bets we make, who attends high-profile events, who is in the spotlight and so on. It has been a team-effort, and we are not all the way there yet, but I’m proud of my contribution in being

assertive in re-orienting the ship.” Brad is proud of positioning HR as the backbone in a stronger operating company. “Over the past year, we flipped the matrix, with HR becoming a global ‘solid-line’ function, with dotted-line reporting into the businesses, as opposed to the other way around. This gives us an ability to turn a strong global HR function into the operational backbone of the company going forward.” And finally, turning diversity and especially inclusion into an emerging company superpower. “A couple years back, our company leadership looked and felt very male, stale, and pale. Setting Diversity & Inclusion as a strategic initiative (deliberately not an HR one), has meant that our leadership broadly have rallied around the topic, which has resulted in positive impact for the benefit of our company, our customers, our shareholders, and our employees.”

What did Brad learn while in that HR role? “Sponsor others. Give them stretch assignments. Invite them to show off their work. Connect them with others. Give people a chance to surprise you (and themselves), not by throwing them in the deep end without a raft, but rather empower and let them own something end-to-end.” Being data-oriented and developing stronger people analytics is powerful, as data leads to reporting leads to insights – which gives one a strong position to be able to drive the business forward. Finally, Brad highlights the importance of aligning people through outcomes, not metrics: “Metrics are proxies for success. So if we can align around ‘what the end game looks like’, we are all much more likely to get the right finish line.”

### Business leaders looking for an opportunity

These stories definitely suggest that strong leaders with no prior HR specialist background can make outstanding leaders of the People function in an organization. What makes our subjects powerful in their impact as CHROs is their common humility, deep knowledge of the

### 7 Pieces of Advice for Business Leaders Transitioning to a CHRO Role

1. Go beyond the perception that HR, as a functional role, is less valued or admired than other line roles
2. As you onboard into the new role, don't come too quickly with the answers; take the time to visit, listen, question, understand the culture and what makes people tick throughout the organization
3. Leverage previous knowledge and experience in other areas of the business to assert your credibility in an authentic way
4. Get early wins, identify some practical problems that can be fixed simply and quickly; don't be afraid to throw out some of the sacred cows
5. Put the People strategy at the center of the business, and the HR function as the mechanism that delivers it
6. Work collaboratively with your HR team, respect and leverage their expertise, help them join the dots and strengthen their credibility and pride
7. Enjoy the stretch and the ride, appreciate the opportunity it provides to broaden your capabilities and leadership repertoire

business, strategic perspective, and the desire to learn even more, so as to serve the business and nurture the talent of the company. These are qualities that make for excellent leaders of the function, and might even give space for a great CEO to emerge.

The five stories we shared with you teach us that, while often underutilized and overlooked as a lever for business impact, a shift into the CHRO role — done correctly — can be a great career move. Alan Mulally, former CEO of Ford, once said that “the best CHROs become unbelievable business strategists.” So we leave you with this question: How would you fare if you found yourself as head of People in your organization? Would you see it as a reward or a punishment? And how could you use the role to create even more value for all?

**Antoine Tirard** is a talent management advisor and the founder of NexTalent. He is the former head of talent management of Novartis and LVMH. **Claire Harbour** is a global talent expert, focused on coaching and consulting across borders, and stirring up disruption!