

Gartner®

CHRO Global Leadership Board

Resource Guide for New CHROs



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Overview

Newly appointed chief human resources officers (CHROs) face a range of unique challenges, from establishing credibility with employees to aligning priorities with the CEO. Increasingly, CHROs are expected to take on new roles outside of the traditional scope of HR. New CHROs struggle with their transition, not because they lack the skills or experience for the role, but because they fail to build the right support network and properly plan for it. This guide can better prepare new CHROs for the challenges and opportunities of their first few months by detailing the experience and advice of tenured CHROs and senior HR leaders.

Key Findings:

- In their first few months, new CHROs are expected to tackle many responsibilities. Advice from tenured CHROs suggests focusing on planning a “listening tour,” learning senior management’s goals and priorities, and identifying quick wins to establish credibility.
- New CHROs have a wealth of resources available to them internally and externally to help them in their new role, including: the HR leadership team, personal networks inside and outside the organization, professional networks and the CEO.

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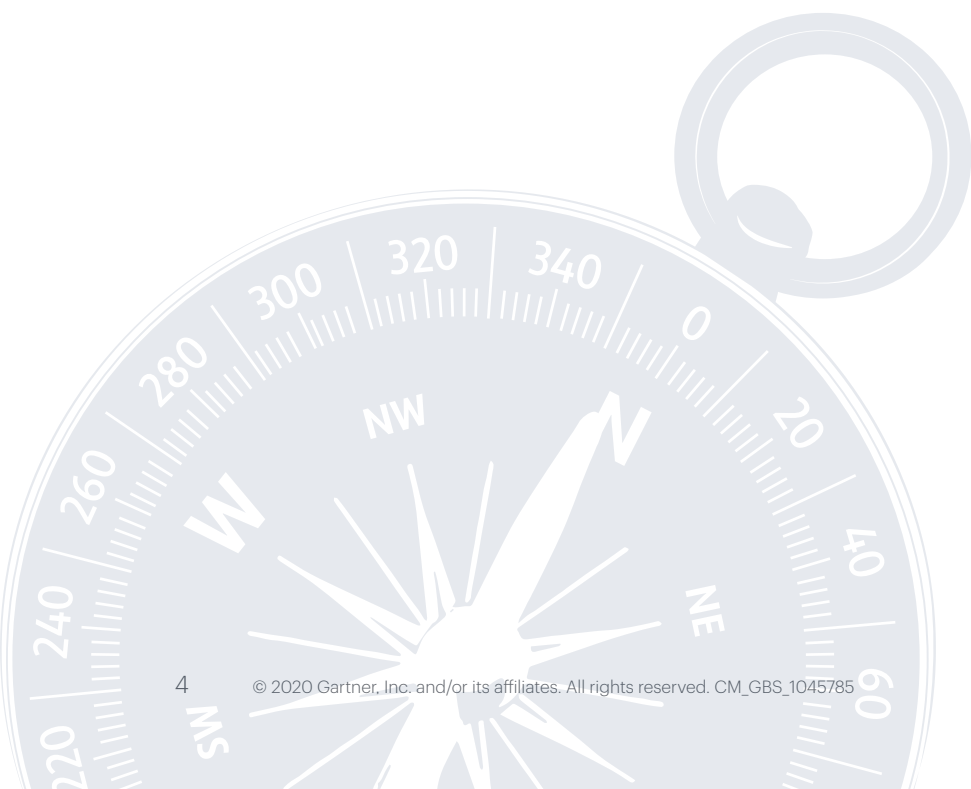
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Introduction

Newly appointed executives can find themselves in uncharted territory — whether in a new role, at a new organization or both. Despite their skills and experience, new executives often struggle because they fail to build the right support network and properly plan for their transition.

The role of the CHRO is constantly changing. CEOs expect CHROs to take on increasing responsibilities and in many cases, work on issues and projects not typically associated with the HR function. Newly appointed CHROs must quickly identify and act on CEO's key priorities to ensure a successful transition and future as CHRO.

This resource guide is based on the experience of tenured CHROs and other senior HR leaders who have supported new CHROs and documented their lessons, tools and templates. The first part of this guide provides advice regarding the biggest challenges and opportunities for a newly appointed CHRO, framed around the five core roles discussed in the [“Model of a World-Class CHRO.”](#) The second part of the resource guide provides a sample of key resources — external and internal — to guide new CHROs in their first few months.



Part 1:

The Core Roles of a World Class CHRO

The “[Model of a World-Class CHRO](#)” establishes a global standard for excellence in CHROs. It can be used to help incumbent CHROs improve performance, aspiring CHROs develop more thoughtfully and rapidly, and CEOs and corporate boards hold the CHRO to a high standard commensurate with the evolving expectations of this critical role.

The model is meant to be aspirational, and even seasoned CHROs may struggle to excel at every outcome. New CHROs should discuss this model with the CEO to best determine how they should prioritize the five core roles, based on the CEO’s priorities and the strategic position and direction of the business. Importantly, leading CHROs never ignore any of these roles, even if they disproportionately prioritize one or two in a given year.

Board’s leader of human capital

Talent continues to be a top agenda item for boards of directors. In fact, when boards were asked to rank their top five business challenges for the next two years, talent acquisition, development and retention ranked second, behind digital disruption. Boards are calling on CHROs to not only support them on executive compensation or succession planning but also guide the board in making other important talent decisions. For new CHROs, this could prove challenging, as few senior HR leaders outside of the CHRO have had direct exposure to the board. This core role is likely to require the most time to develop for new CHROs.

First step to take

Gather information about board members and their interactions.

Work with the CEO to better understand the relationship between the board and the executive team. Agree on how to best interact with board members. If possible, meet with board members one-on-one to establish a connection outside of the boardroom and learn more about their views, expectations and priorities. Some new CHROs may even meet board members during the interview process.

Review governance documents and meeting minutes to understand the board’s cadence for covering topics. Meeting minutes will also provide information on the board’s thinking and opinions during prior talent conversations.

Greatest opportunity in this role

Shaping the organization's approach to external trends:

CHROs are being called on to spend more time translating external trends for the board. This responsibility offers CHROs the unique opportunity to partner with the board and craft the organization's approach to addressing new trends. This is a chance to ask more open-ended, big-picture questions without necessarily having already developed an explicit plan or strategy. Starting the dialogue with the board and crafting the right vision for how to address new trends is important.

Challenges and risks to look out for

Deepening the understanding of executive compensation and CEO succession:

New-to-role CHROs are unlikely to have much prior experience in these areas, but they are top board concerns. New CHROs should spend ample time thoughtfully preparing for these conversations to be able to provide fact- and data-based analyses in committee and full board meetings.

Aligning strategy with board expectations:

Most CHROs are underprepared to have board-level discussions on human capital strategies as they relate to business strategies. A successful CHRO knows how to prioritize the right talent issues for the board and elevate from the tactical and operational to the strategic issues. When presenting to the board, CHROs must explain all talent trends in terms of business outcomes.

Balancing the opinions of the board and CEO while respecting their relationship:

Some issues, such as CEO succession planning, will require a certain amount of neutrality, while other issues, such as workforce planning, provide an opportunity for thought leadership. A CHRO must recognize the right time to provide an opinion and be aware of the relationship between the CEO and board; avoid surprising the CEO during a board meeting with new information or strategies.

"New CHROs will benefit from doing their homework prior to the first meeting. If you know the company strategy and its current strengths and you have researched board members — what experience they bring to the table and the skill sets they bring to complement the growth strategy — you can initiate the right conversations."

Abbe Luersman, CHRO, Ahold Delhaize

Creator of Talent Strategy

Building a talent strategy that links with the business strategy and addresses current and future trends is an essential role of a CHRO. In the first few months, a new CHRO will likely be expected to express an opinion on changes and improvements to the talent strategy that the CEO and the board are expecting. Regardless of whether the CHRO was an external or internal hire, it's important to learn any risks and opportunities before executing any major changes. A newly appointed CHRO who is transitioning from an outside organization will likely need to spend more time learning about the workforce and critical roles than a new CHRO promoted from within.

First step to take

Review the current talent strategy.

Work with the CEO, the HR leadership team and other senior business leaders to understand the current talent strategy, its strengths and its weaknesses. After evaluating the strategy and the business's strategic objectives, identify possible changes and calibrate these changes with the CEO.

Before executing any changes, test a new strategy with the HR function. The support of the HR staff is important, as they have more insight into how changes will affect the workforce.

Greatest opportunity in this role

Providing a different perspective to assess current strategy:

The first few months in the role provide a unique opportunity that cannot be replicated at the same organization — the new owner of a talent strategy developed by the outgoing CHRO. As an internal or external hire, a new CHRO has a fresh perspective and should apply new expertise to reestablish or reshape that strategy.

Challenges and risks to look out for

Designing a talent strategy that aligns with business growth:

When creating a new talent strategy, it must be aligned with business strategy. A successful CHRO partners closely with the business to create and execute the talent strategy. To ensure business growth does not outpace the talent strategy, CHROs should create a strategy that can evolve with the business.

Sorting through the noise to identify the right strategy:

Unless the business is very focused, listening tours, interviews and information gathering will likely lead to competing information. A new CHRO may struggle to identify what changes need to be made to an existing strategy or prioritized. CHROs should rely on a strong network at the organization to identify the right approach to take.

“Business transformation depends on our ability to attract, motivate and engage talent at all levels. Today’s leading CEOs expect CHROs to fully understand the business challenges and opportunities in the face of digital automation and disruption. It is a great opportunity for CHROs to lead with a holistic talent strategy that not only produces a workforce plan to fill talent gaps but energizes the entire organization with a sense of purpose and urgency.”

Marcia Morales-Jaffe, Former Chief People Officer, PayPal

Enterprise Change Leader

As CEOs have recognized the value of talent in business strategies, the role of the CHRO has evolved. The CHRO is now expected to be a key driver in facilitating change and innovation at the organization. More than half of HR leaders believe leaders at their organizations are not equipped to lead change. Consequently, CHROs must take the responsibility of guiding their organizations through enterprise changes and hold leaders accountable in the process. Creating the strategy and gaining momentum to effectively promote change as a new CHRO can be challenging. New CHROs need to have the right leadership skills and understanding of the business to be successful.

First step to take

Understand current change initiatives to identify quick wins.

Work with the executive team to understand the current state and progress of strategic enterprise changes. A new CHRO will need some time to get up to speed in this area, but identifying a few quick wins within the first few months is important. These quick wins will be low-hanging fruit but will show the desire to make bold changes when necessary.

Greatest opportunity in this role

Showcasing leadership skills:

Facilitating change and innovation will display prior leadership experience, which helps build a new CHRO’s credibility throughout the organization. During any enterprise changes, a successful CHRO creates a plan and places the right people in the right roles to drive excellent execution. If HR is seen as an example for how to lead change, the CHRO will be able to better advocate for and lead change throughout the organization.

Challenges and risks to look out for

Shifting framework from tactical and operational to strategic:

When deciding whether to implement enterprise changes, new CHROs are likely more accustomed to using a tactical or operational framework. As a CHRO, shifting focus to be the strategic leader who guides the business through change is important.

Maintaining transparency about upcoming changes:

During any enterprise changes, it's important to ensure the business comes along in the process. A new CHRO should partner and manage the business through the change, which includes creating a plan to inform the leaders and workforce during key milestones in the process. A successful CHRO will be viewed as an ally to the workforce.

"If you enter the company with no established reputation, you are building your credibility while also challenging conventional wisdom. At the same time, you are asking people to trust your prior experience and expertise in the space. And while all of this is happening, you need to effectively analyze the current state against business objectives with a critical eye, to ensure you are driving change in the areas of greatest strategic impact."

Lynanne Kunkel, CHRO, Vail Resorts

Driver of Culture and Purpose

Over 75% of business leaders believe purpose is central to better business outcomes. While the CEO is the true owner of the organization's culture, the CHRO is responsible for building and evolving the culture with the CEO. Partnering with the CEO to define or redefine culture is unique to the CHRO role and likely to be unfamiliar to those taking on the role for the first time. While reshaping the culture may not be an immediate need, CHROs are responsible for ensuring culture is more than "words on the wall" and holding the workforce, including leadership, accountable for following and supporting it.

First step to take

Understand the culture (what is and isn't sacred).

Work with all levels of the business to understand the culture and how it drives business performance. During interviews, a new CHRO will likely be exposed to the organization's culture, both explicitly and implicitly. After joining, a new CHRO should speak with all levels of the organization to truly understand whether employees' and leadership's behavior aligns with the defined culture.

Do not immediately rush to make changes to the culture, especially if they're not a priority for the CEO. The first goal should be to understand what aspects of the organization's culture are and are not sacred.

Greatest opportunity in this role

Rescoping the organization's culture:

While culture can be challenging to redefine, those changes can also be some of the most vital to an organization. New CHROs have the opportunity to shape the culture in different ways, beyond major changes. Small changes, such as aligning culture with competencies or providing more focused culture priorities for leaders, can have a big impact.

Challenges and risks to look out for

Navigating differences of opinion with the CEO:

CEOs often view culture as a competitive advantage, so they are likely to play a big role in maintaining it. While the CEO is the true owner of the organization's culture, the CHRO is expected to execute culture initiatives. Consequently, the CEO and CHRO must be aligned on not only the culture but also what the organization should be doing to measure and maintain it.

Changing the culture too quickly:

Even if it's a top priority for the CEO, a new CHRO should not immediately make wide-ranging changes to the culture. A successful cultural transformation needs to provide a clear rationale for why it is necessary and have the full support of the board and executive team. For a new CHRO, culture surveys, interviews and a fresh perspective will help inform any culture initiatives.

“Employees are our top value. In a time when people have many options for where they work, we see our culture and values as a competitive advantage: They are core to how we attract great talent and how [we] drive strong performance as a company. As HR leaders, we have the opportunity to create an environment where people find purpose in their work, and we have the obligation to ensure our programs, processes, policies and day-to-day actions are in support of that culture and don’t just become hollow words on a break room poster.”

Ashley Goldsmith, Chief People Officer, Workday

Trusted Advisor and Coach

As with any position, building trust and credibility with colleagues and bosses is key to success. This requirement becomes more important as the CEO and other senior leaders rely on the CHRO to serve as an advisor and coach on human capital and other business issues. New CHROs should build a trusting relationship with the executive team early in their tenure for two reasons. First, doing so helps CHROs develop their coaching and feedback skills to build stronger leaders. Second, when the hard issues arise in the future, the executive team will see the CHRO as an impartial voice. Balancing effective partnering with the executive team and holding them accountable on tough issues is a challenge for any CHRO, especially someone newly appointed.

First step to take

Establish a working relationship with the CEO (and the executive team).

Meet with the CEO early and often to establish expectations and strategy moving forward. With the CEO, the CHRO will serve a dual role as a direct report and a confidant, so new CHROs should have an early conversation to determine the parameters of this important working relationship.

While the working relationship with the rest of the executive team will be different, the new CHRO must also meet with this team to understand business operations, current issues with HR and opportunities for an expanded partnership.

Greatest opportunity in this role

Redefining how the business values and uses HR:

Whenever an organization's executive team changes, the business also expects the new team to make changes. While major disruptions to the business should be avoided in the short term, a new CHRO has a clean slate to redefine and reshape the relationship between HR and the executive team. A successful CHRO will work with the executive team to shape the vision for how the business will use HR.

Challenges and risks to look out for

Building trust and credibility with the CEO:

Trust and credibility with the CEO are essential to a productive partnership. A successful CHRO can not only advise the CEO on key talent issues but also provide honest, balanced counsel on a wide range of business issues. To build this relationship, consider creating an informal contract on the best way to work together. Be transparent and set expectations at the start.

Balancing executive team dynamics:

The executive team, unless it's a completely new team, may already be highly politicized. A new CHRO is likely stepping into a specific team dynamic. While assessing and improving these dynamics is important, a successful CHRO finds the right way to balance the team and serve as an unbiased partner.

"One of the biggest challenges you face is the management and facilitation of executive team dynamics — how to have the desired impact and influence on a leadership team in a way that doesn't damage the team or create feelings of jealousy or threat among others on the team."

— **Kevin Cox, CHRO, General Electric**

The CHRO Self-Diagnostic

Gartner's "CHRO Self-Diagnostic" assesses the mastery and relative importance of activities, based on the five core roles of a world-class CHRO. For new CHROs, this diagnostic provides critical insight into their strengths and weaknesses as HR leaders. Upon completion of the survey, participants will immediately receive a personalized feedback report detailing their strengths, development opportunities and next steps based on their responses. This feedback report will help new CHROs further prioritize HR activities and development opportunities based on the core roles.

Part 2:

Resources to Take Action

A better understanding of the challenges associated with a CHRO's early days provides a framework to prepare and strategize. This section provides practical guidance and a list of helpful resources, including suggestions from the CHRO Global Leadership Board as well as tools from other Gartner research.

Internal Resources

HR Function and Its Leadership Team

In the initial months, the HR function will provide a great starting point to understanding its priorities and challenges. The new CHRO should spend time seeking the perspective of the HR leadership team and select staff, as they are likely close to the workforce and current processes.

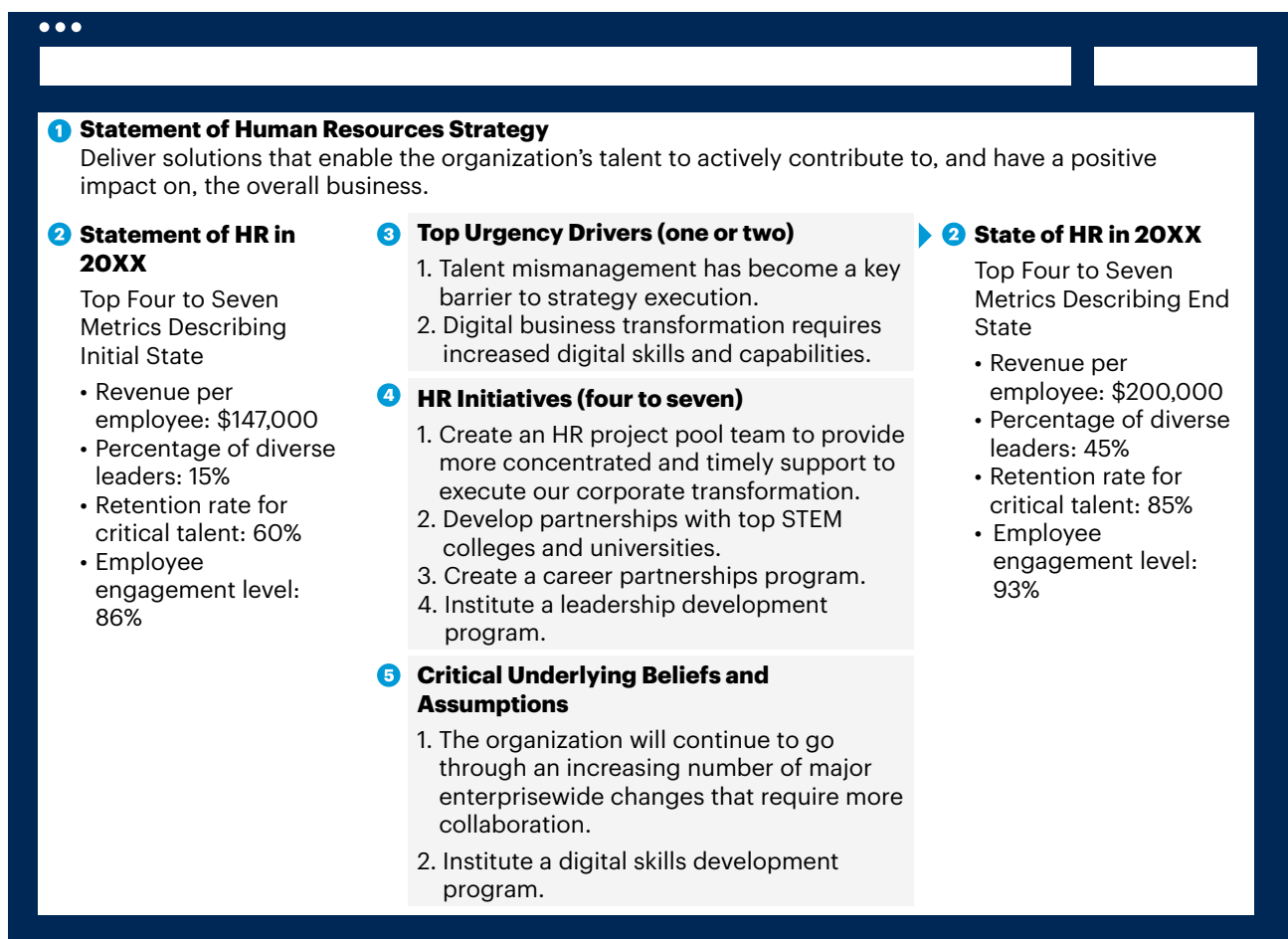
To get the most value from this exercise, the new CHRO should focus on a set of questions that help uncover the function's strengths and weaknesses, including:

- Was there anything the previous CHROs did that was particularly helpful or unhelpful?
- What do you believe are the top two priorities for the HR function in the next 12 months?
- What external customer considerations should I keep in mind when formulating and implementing HR strategy?

HR Function Strategy

The foundation of a CHRO's strategy is a well-managed HR function. New CHROs should meet with the HR staff to discuss their strategy and the steps they plan to take to implement it. Rather than relying on a top-down model, inviting staff to test assumptions and provide their own input helps them feel engaged and connected to larger strategic goals. Figure 1 shows how CHROs can communicate their vision to the team.

Figure 1. HR Strategy on a Page



Source: Gartner

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Quick Wins for the Function

Identifying a few quick wins at the beginning of a new CHRO's tenure can go a long way to build credibility within the organization. The CHRO should look for pain points where a policy change could make a noticeable improvement and have those changes in motion by day 30. However, CHROs who focus too much on quick wins run the risk of alienating their teams if those plans are not collaborative. Use the ideas outlined in Figure 2 to identify quick wins and ensure they are collaborative in nature.

Figure 2. Evaluating Quick Win Opportunities

	Value	Cost and Feasibility	Collective Impact	Learning Opportunity	Relationship Building
Quick Win	The opportunity should be linked to an urgent critical business outcome with a clear connection to enterprise growth or cost reduction in HR or other functions.	You should be able to achieve this win without substantially distracting your HR leadership team from their day-to-day work or using new resources.	Once achieved, your entire HR leadership team should feel they contributed to the win.	The opportunity should provide you with additional insight on your HR leaders' strengths, weaknesses, motivations, aspirations and working dynamics.	The potential win should require you to seek guidance and input from your direct reports, C-suite peers and CEO.
Identity	If achieved, would this win merit the attention of the CEO?	Can we pursue this win without the need for new resources?	Will all key members of the HR leadership team be able to see their impact on this win?	Will this effort allow me to learn the dynamics of the team's working relationships?	Will this effort require me to seek input, guidance and coaching from my direct reports?
Prioritize	After identifying potential quick wins, prioritize them based on the extent each quick win takes advantage of your strengths, involves your team and is likely to show early results.				

Source: Gartner

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Senior Leadership and the Board

Some of the most important early meetings are those with the CEO. Because the CHRO is a direct report and confidant to the CEO, this relationship in particular can be tricky to navigate.

CEO

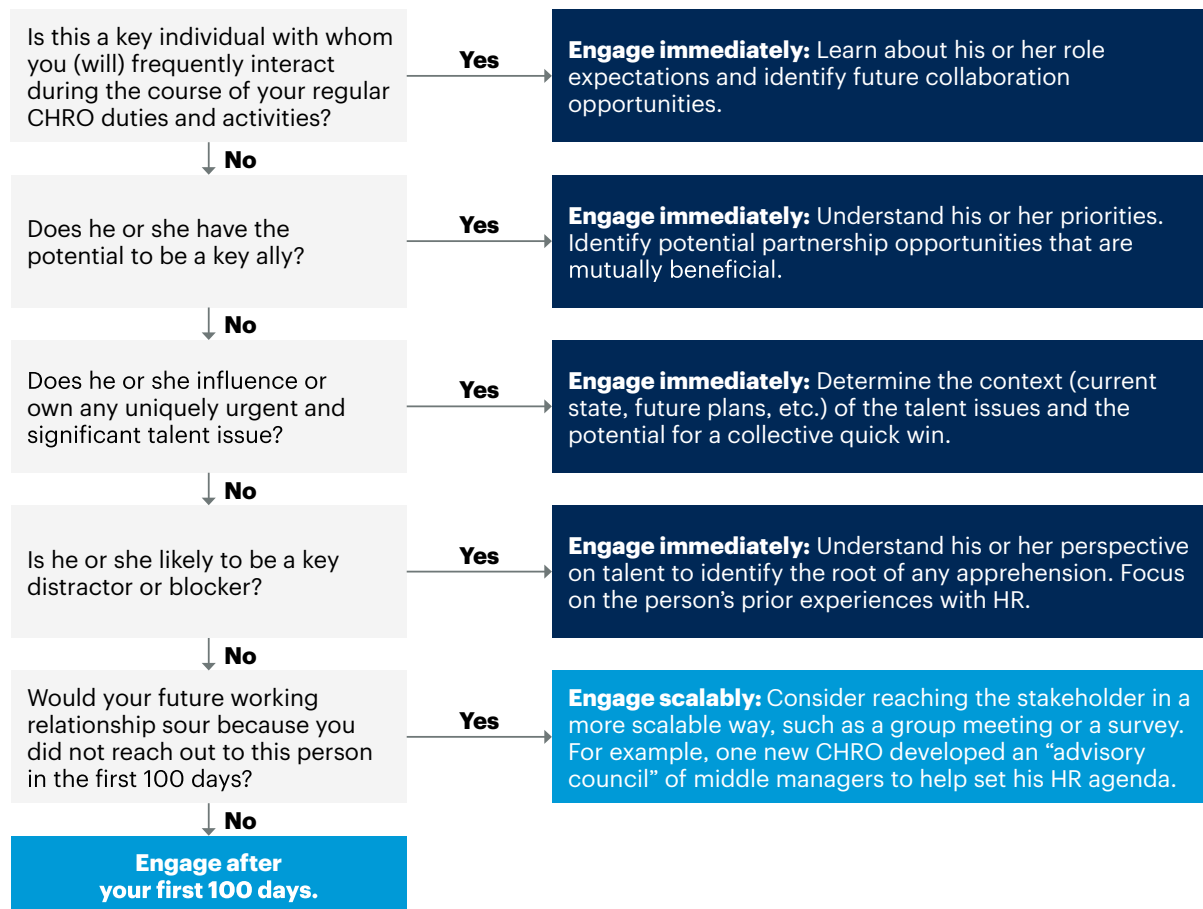
The first meeting with the CEO is an opportunity to build a strong relationship early and ensure alignment from day one. Beyond establishing key priorities for HR and fitting in to the board workflow, productive questions might include:

- What does it mean to you to have a high-performing organization now? In five years?
- What role do you expect me to play when coaching my peers?
- What are the ground rules for when I need to give you informal feedback?

The Listening Tour

The “listening tour,” a series of individual meetings with stakeholders, is an essential component of a CHRO’s first few months. Each meeting offers a unique opportunity to get to know a particular part of the organization and better understand the culture. In addition, the meetings provide an opportunity to identify rising stars among the organization’s talent, which can be a valuable component of a CHRO’s personal network. Building and nurturing these early stakeholder relationships can serve new CHROs well when they need allies.

Without a plan and clearly mapped objectives, a large number of meetings with stakeholders throughout the organization can quickly become rote and repetitive. Figure 3 shows how to identify the most significant and influential stakeholders.

Figure 3. Stakeholder Prioritization Flow Chart

Source: Gartner

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After selecting a group of the most significant stakeholders, the new CHRO should take some time to plan the most productive questions to ask. Each meeting provides unique information and context that should remain the focus. Here is a sample of suggested questions to ask on the listening tour:

- What do you see as the two or three most pressing concerns or biggest business challenges for the board and executive team at this time? Looking ahead, what challenges do you anticipate the board and executive team will face over the next 12 to 36 months?
- How well do you think the HR staff understand the needs of the business (or your specific function)?
- How could HR improve communication or collaboration to enhance your working relationship?

The Board

The board-CHRO connection is another vital relationship for the new CHRO. Since few new CHROs have experience dealing directly with the board before they start, they must take advantage of early opportunities for relationship building. With the CEO's approval, the new CHRO should try to get a one-on-one interview with each member of the board to better understand their individual strengths and expertise. Since the board does not necessarily expect a new CHRO to immediately deliver on specific initiatives, these early meetings are an ideal time for new CHROs to familiarize themselves with the board's priorities and vision. Some priority areas of discussion include:

- Determining board member satisfaction with talent: "Do you believe as a board you are spending enough time on talent matters related to our business objectives?"
- Soliciting board member expectations of the CHRO: "How do you evaluate the effectiveness of senior management, including the CHRO?"

External Resources

When challenges arise in the CHRO's new role, a network of knowledgeable peers inside and outside the organization will be an exceptionally useful tool.

A Group of Trusted Peers

Peers can offer advice, serve as a sounding board and help new CHROs gain confidence as they adjust. A new CHRO will likely already know a few good candidates, such as colleagues from previous organizations. However, networks don't just happen; they must be intentionally cultivated by creating open lines of communication with trusted peers whose opinions the CHRO values. New CHROs can build their networks by:

- Attending group events for CHROs and making a special effort to get to know attendees whose perspective resonates with them, especially those who are in similar industries.
- Cold calling CHROs and CEOs at organizations they admire, either before they reach the CHRO level or when they are new in role, to get advice about what makes a world-class CHRO; these calls enable new CHROs to identify their own strengths and weaknesses, and also give them an opportunity to connect later if they need guidance.
- Developing relationships with peers within their organizations outside of HR.
- Maintaining contacts from past organizations (e.g., a former boss, colleague or CHRO).
- Joining associations for HR leaders such as those listed in the "Additional Board Resources" section.

Professional Networks

A CHRO's personal network is not the only important resource outside of the organization. Beyond the national organizations listed here, many areas have their own local CHRO networks and events. Summits and workshops offer an excellent opportunity to share ideas and develop relationships with peers. They also offer a unique opportunity to speak directly with vendors. However, new CHROs should be wary of traveling too often or attending too many events in their first few months. Prioritizing tasks and managing time can present a significant challenge, so the CHRO should be careful to attend only the essential outside events.

Additional Board Resources

[HR Policy Association \(HRPA\)](#) and the Center on Executive Compensation: HRPA is a nonprofit public policy organization of CHROs whose membership represents over 390 large and influential corporations. It hosts summits and seminars, engages in advocacy, reports on the latest news in HR and provides opportunities for enrichment and professional development. The Center on Executive Compensation is a focused initiative within HRPA.

[National Academy of Human Resources \(NAHR\)](#): NAHR recognizes individuals and organizations of distinction in the field. Its fellows publish research, tools, best-practice cases and other resources for HR professionals.

[G100 Network Talent Consortium](#): G100 Network membership programs are aimed at CEOs, executive teams and board directors. Its Talent Consortium program focuses on human capital issues from the CEO's and board's perspective. The organization hosts events focused on peer to peer convening, learning and development.

[Health Transformation Alliance \(HTA\)](#): HTA is a group of 50 major corporations working together to create research and policy solutions to lower healthcare costs and improve the quality of care for employees.

[Cornell Center for Advanced Human Resources Studies \(CAHRS\)](#): CAHRS is a partnership between Cornell University and 65 of the world's premier companies. The center produces original research on a wide variety of HR-related topics and connects HR executives, faculty and students through events and webinars.

[Center on Executive Succession](#): The Center on Executive Succession is a partnership center within the University of South Carolina Darla Moore School of Business that provides a forum for corporate leaders to shape the future strategic direction of succession practices. It generates original research and hosts events.

Conclusion

While transitioning to the CHRO role presents unique challenges, it also presents unique opportunities. Viewing professional development through the lens of the Model of a World-Class CHRO can help new CHROs focus their time on the most critical development tasks in their first few months. Through careful planning and with the advice of tenured CHROs, new CHROs can excel in the following roles:

- Board's leader of human capital
- Creator of talent strategy
- Enterprise change leader
- Driver of culture and purpose
- Trusted advisor and coach

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