



Advice for CHROs: Architect Your Transition into Your New Role

Every new chief human resources officer comes into the role from a place of success. Past impact produced the invitation into the C-suite or into a new organization. But past success, no matter how significant, does not guarantee a successful transition. What worked before may not generate the same success at a more senior level.

Russell Reynolds Associates interviewed a diverse group of 21 CHROs from around the world earlier this year. Each had been in their current role between 9 and 18 months. Our goal was to uncover the best advice for new CHROs and to learn what these leaders wished they had done differently during their transition.



Before the Starting Line

These leaders recognized the need to have clarity about what drives the business before day one.

Walking in on your first day, a general understanding of the new company's industry, operating model, and strategy is not enough. While this learning begins in the interview process, it continues with research and first conversations.

One CHRO told us, "Do your prep work—before you start and in the first two weeks. Dig into financials, proxy, shareholder materials, strategy documents. The goal is to understand the business as quickly as possible." But archival research is not enough. The learning deepens in your first conversations with people at the company. Advice for these initial discussions included to "talk about the business, not about HR." Another CHRO suggested a new leader "learn the context. Learn the history of the business, the board, and the leadership team as well as the infrastructure and technology." A third said, "discover the key levers in the business. How does the business make money? What are the sensitivities around that?"

The discovery work is also about what the CHRO will need to change and what should stay the same: "Understand the legacy, what you're trying to preserve, and how you'll make that happen from a business and people point of view." "Break some things, strategically. Make your mark in your team and identify the gaps on the ELT quickly." And critically, "balance the urgent and important versus the strategic."



Only You Can Create Your Onboarding

You were one of the onboarding experts in your previous role and one of the ways you impress your colleagues is with your plan for integrating into the ELT and organization from bottom to top. One HR leader stated decisively: "Own your onboarding beginning with the day you accept the job."

You can be the driver of culture change in your new organization. You begin with how you introduce yourself and simultaneously assess the organization. Our leaders emphasized the process begins with mindset. "Prepare for a baptism by fire," said one CHRO. Another recommended, "think of this as a year-long learning lab." "I would really try to not be slowed down by some of the stuff in my head."

And as much as you will want to move fast, patience matters too, for both you and your colleagues. Two leaders reflected back on their experience, with one saying they would have "[told] myself to be more patient and not put so much pressure to deliver." The other "would give myself more patience and give my CEO more benefit of the doubt."



Own your onboarding beginning with the day you accept the job.





Build Trust First

With business insight and a mindset of learning and patience, the most important work of your onboarding plan is building relationships. One CHRO said, “Really focus on building relationships and listening. Don’t have a preset agenda on what you think is right.” Almost every leader wished they had done a better job of connecting with others in the first year. They challenged new CHROs to do better. “Be more intentional about building relationships: time, setting, and frequency matter,” said one. “I would have focused more on my manager relationships,” said another. A third remarked, “I would probably try to spend more time with my colleagues and with my CEO earlier on.”



Be more intentional about building relationships: time, setting, and frequency matter.



The CEO presents a unique challenge. Most CHROs, when new to a team, spend so much time pursuing the CEO’s attention that they inadequately engage other members of the ELT. They don’t spend enough time with leaders a few levels down, who really hold the secrets of the organization.

An added wrinkle is CEO tenure. Some CEOs will be in their seats for many years. Others may also be transitioning into their role as the CHRO joins. In either case, the advice about the CEO relationship is still about building connection immediately: “I think I would be in the CEO’s face more. I would have built a stronger relationship with him more quickly and I would have commenced that charter of what we’re working on together as a team earlier.”

At the same time, pay attention to your ethos, especially as a first-time CHRO. “Invest in who the CEO is and stand your ground with her. You have to be a forceful personality.” Another leader remarked, “I think it’s a general view with HR, that the CHRO is in the pocket of the CEO. That never works because the rest of the executive team doesn’t trust you. One of the things I did was to very clearly take an opposing position publicly, not in an inappropriate way, but just to help people see that I was my own person.”

While you need to work quickly to build the CEO connection, you also need to demonstrate some independence and separation.



Invest in who the CEO is and stand your ground with her.



Pay Attention: Every Word Counts

Experienced leaders can make assessments quickly, but should remember to keep some of those thoughts to themselves until they have a broader understanding of the organization and its people. Even those who consciously held back felt that they could have held back even more. “I would’ve expressed my views even less to start with,” one noted. “I held back a lot, but some of my comments about talent were perceived as judgmental.”

That leader told us, starting again, “I would’ve said even less.” It is hard for the views to not come across as judgmental. As a new leader without the history, make judgements and use them to build the business, not simply to show expertise.



The Curious Case of Travel in the New World

One of our leaders regretted not traveling more. They said, “I didn’t make it to Australia, and it is our second largest country. Why did I not go there earlier?” Another said, “I’d travel even more. For example, I was meant to get to Asia in January, but we had to cancel that.” The guidance is clear. Travel early and often for the face-to-face meetings that build comfort and trust.

When travel is not possible, make use of virtual communication. Two leaders expressed the power of the new virtual platforms that became ubiquitous in 2020: “Don’t make excuses regarding technology impacting relationship building negatively—it can be even more effective.” And “virtual communication does not have to be a poor substitute for physical communication. It’s different. You can’t pretend they’re the same. The feedback we’ve had from the broader team is that they really like the live events that we’ve been doing with thousands of people online. Strangely, it actually feels much more intimate.”



Don’t make excuses regarding technology impacting relationship building negatively—it can be even more effective.



Be Brave with Talent

Every conversation is a chance to assess the talent you have and the gaps to be filled. Your lens of what makes the business successful means you have new eyes on the commercial engine, but also the people needed for sustainability and progress.

CHROs also repeatedly spoke of the need to listen outside of HR. Go wide in the organization because you want to recognize the talent, layers deep, that is ready to help you with the changes that need to happen.

But don’t be afraid to make changes when certain personalities are damaging the enterprise. You will be seen as using your judgement wisely. One leader noted, “hindsight is easier. I could have moved on someone on my team who was more destructive than constructive.” Another leader said, “I put up with a bit of bad behavior towards me for too long.”



Prioritize, Prioritize, Prioritize

What has to be done? Because you came into your early days with business clarity and an open mindset, your initial plan to build relationships uncovered the real strengths and needs. But you captured a tremendous amount of data. After onboarding, your next months demand prioritization. CHROs urged their peers to “be very



Learn and list your priorities and your mandate. Know what success looks like for each of your key stakeholders.



focused on important and key priorities and don’t get drowned by the noise.” Another recommended to “learn and list your priorities and your mandate. Know what success looks like for each of your key stakeholders.” A third said “it is important to focus on your top three priorities. Think about what you want to accomplish and how you are going to measure the progress.”

The Playbook from Those Who Just Lived It

What these CHROs provided is a playbook for architecting success in your transition into a new CHRO role. Every leader has talents, and you are already great at some of what our leaders recommended. Remember that every action you take adds up to a successful transition.

- 1** First, **approach this new role as an entirely different piece of work.** As a film maker can't simply reuse old story lines, this transition needs to be different from your last one.
- 2** Begin the work the moment you are first approached about the role. **Learn the business both from research and conversations. In those first conversations,** note the leader's backgrounds, how the business is commercially successful, what needs to be preserved, and where change needs to happen.
- 3** **Enter the first day with a self-onboarding plan.** Be in conversation with your CEO, board, and other key stakeholders about this ahead of time. Show from the very start that you know where to focus your attention based on your extensive business insight.
- 4** **Focus your initial months on building trusted relationships.** Don't just focus on the CEO. Expand to the C-suite and as many layers down in the organization as time allows. Travel to as many offices, sites, and countries as you can. When you can't, use video communications to create effective interactions. People need to see you to believe in your vision.
- 5** **As you build relationships, assess capacity.** Based on your business analysis, be looking for stars, underachievers, and successors. Have a system to recognize the talent and the gaps. Do not hesitate to make changes in the face of obvious bad behavior. Changing out leaders who have stayed too long shows your orientation towards action.
- 6** Finally, **as you prepare for the entirety of your first year, prioritize vigorously.** Your preparation, relationship investment, and assessment data will reveal more work than you and your team can achieve right away. Your prioritization will show your CEO and the board you are the leader the business needs for the future.

Click [here](#) to read about how CHROs are making the most of disruption to transform their organizations.

AUTHORS

MICHELLE CHAN CROUSE is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Human Resources practice. She is based in Singapore.

KATHERINE HENRY is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Human Resources practice. She is based in Melbourne.

DIANA HORN is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Leadership & Succession practice. She is based in Copenhagen.

KINGA PEERS is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Human Resources practice. She is based in London.

ANNA PENFOLD co-leads Russell Reynolds Associates' Human Resources practice globally. She is based in London.

BRAD PUGH is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Human Resources practice. He is based in Atlanta.

TY WIGGINS is a member of Russell Reynolds Associates' Leadership & Succession practice. He is based in Sydney.

About Russell Reynolds Associates

Russell Reynolds Associates is a global leadership advisory and search firm. Our 470+ consultants in 46 offices work with public, private and nonprofit organizations across all industries and regions. We help our clients build teams of transformational leaders who can meet today's challenges and anticipate the digital, economic and political trends that are reshaping the global business environment. From helping boards with their structure, culture and effectiveness to identifying, assessing and defining the best leadership for organizations, our teams bring their decades of expertise to help clients address their most complex leadership issues. We exist to improve the way the world is led.

www.russellreynolds.com



GLOBAL OFFICES

AMERICAS

- Atlanta
- Boston
- Buenos Aires
- Calgary
- Chicago
- Dallas
- Houston
- Los Angeles
- Mexico City
- Miami
- Minneapolis/St. Paul
- Montréal
- New York
- Palo Alto
- San Francisco
- São Paulo
- Stamford
- Toronto
- Washington, D.C.

EMEA

- Amsterdam
- Barcelona
- Brussels
- Copenhagen
- Dubai
- Frankfurt
- Hamburg
- Helsinki
- Istanbul
- London
- Madrid
- Milan
- Munich
- Oslo
- Paris
- Stockholm
- Warsaw
- Zürich

ASIA/PACIFIC

- Beijing
- Hong Kong
- Melbourne
- Mumbai
- New Delhi
- Shanghai
- Singapore
- Sydney
- Tokyo