

CORNELL HR REVIEW

Leadership: an HR Leader's Perspective

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From time to time, the Cornell HR Review's staff contributes summaries of speeches from HR thought leaders, often given at Cornell University. The intent is to disseminate the content of these speeches to the wider HR community of practitioners and researchers.

In September 2015, the Human Capital Association (HCA) hosted its 13th Annual Symposium. The HCA is a student-run organization within the Samuel Curtis Johnson School of Management and the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, both at Cornell University. The HCA strives to drive the future of the HR profession through educational and professional development opportunities across the Cornell community. Its annual symposium provides a forum for students, faculty, and corporate executives to come together and explore the various human capital issues prevalent in global business.

The theme for the 2015 HCA Symposium was "Leadership: A Management Perspective on Developing Human Capital." With that theme in mind, HR leaders discussed their views on what makes a great leader, how to develop leaders, and how to identify future leaders.

L. Kevin Cox, Chief Human Resources Officer at American Express, delivered the keynote address. He split his thoughts into three sections, speaking first on the difference between leaders and managers, second on trends in leadership development, and third on his own path to the C-suite.

To help explain the difference between leaders and managers, Cox said, "I don't know many great leaders who aren't or weren't great managers." However, he has found the converse to be true. He considers managing to be "breaking down tasks into steps" and making sure they are completed. In contrast, leading consists of three major practices: (1) setting the agenda, (2) taking others with you, and (3) doing things the right way. He compared these three practices to the guitar chords C, D, and G – three chords that, when learned, enable a beginner to play a large number of songs. Similarly, a leader using these practices will be able to lead well in many situations.

"The most important thing," Cox said, "is this: leadership is context-specific." There is no one leadership style that will work in all situations. However, the three practices he explained can be broadly applied to many situations.

Next, Cox identified three emerging trends in leadership development: (1) the early identification of leadership talent, (2) accelerated leadership development programs, and (3) personal purpose.

Identifying leadership talent early is important, because, according to Cox, “we are not sure you can teach an old dog new tricks,” and even if you can, it might not be worth the effort. It’s better to start with a less-experienced person and train them. He said this realization aligns with what he’s noticed about Millennials: they desire recognition and influence earlier in their careers, compared to Baby Boomers, so they are eager to be identified as having talent early on.

Once leadership talent is identified, the second trend, accelerated leadership development, consists of providing training and attention to those identified in order to help them become leaders quickly. At American Express, Cox has seen that those who participate in an accelerated development program are promoted more often and leave the company less frequently.

The third trend is personal purpose, which Cox said is not your goals and objectives in a job, but the answer to the questions, “What is the reason your job exists? What will your legacy in this job be? When you finish with it, how will we know you were there?” Those with the most courage usually have the clearest sense of purpose, and “Millennials ‘get’ purpose a lot more naturally than Baby Boomers,” said Cox. A great leader should set goals with a broader purpose in mind.

Finally, Cox spoke about his own path to becoming a CHRO, which he said would never have happened without his own passion and aspiration to achieve that ambitious goal. He believes that not having a vision of your career plan puts you at a serious disadvantage. Cox outlined three keys that made his vision a reality: (1) a good mentor, (2) flexibility paired with focus, and (3) “to mind the debits and credits” of your human capital.

Cox highlighted the importance of finding “somebody who sees your potential but hammers you with tough love feedback” to reaching your career goals. This is because “you can’t learn HR yourself,” just as, even with all the online videos available, he goes in each week to guitar lessons because it’s difficult to teach yourself to play the guitar. A teacher and mentor is crucial to help you learn HR through experience.

Second, although Cox was focused on what he wanted to be doing in his career 5 years ahead, he was flexible enough to take on roles that weren’t obvious steps to getting there. He told us about a time that he was excited about taking an HR position in Austria, but at the last minute, his mentor encouraged him to take a job at headquarters. He thought the job in Austria would help his career goals more than staying at headquarters, but he followed his mentor’s advice, and he believes it was the right choice for his career. His goal never changed, but he was flexible about how he obtained it.

The last key to his career success has been “to mind the debits and credits” of his human capital. As a young professional, he borrowed heavily against the human capital assets of

others with more experience, and at some point he decided he was too far in “debt” and needed to give back. He recommended that young professionals find ways to give back to sponsors and professors early in their careers, as soon as possible.

Cox concluded by summarizing his points on the difference between leaders and managers, trends in leadership development, and his own career journey. His success as a leader at American Express is well-documented, and hearing about his own experiences was instructive. He gave practical advice for young leaders in HR, but rather than a simple list of things to do, he spoke about vision and doing things the right way – themes that provided an opportunity to reflect about what makes a great leader, and how each of us can become one. ✎

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