

Strengthening CHRO impact in the boardroom

The CHRO role at the highest interpretation of the profile, linked to the governance and the board of directors.

Roundtable conversation with Christopher Harrison – May 27, 2026

Meet Chris Harrison, a seasoned C-suite executive, board director and trusted strategic advisor with over 30 years of experience working with CEOs and boards to drive growth and enterprise value across Fortune 500, private equity – backed, family owned and non-profit sector businesses. Harrison advises boards and C-suite leaders on board composition and effectiveness, effectual human capital strategies, succession planning, and authentic culture building.



Introduction

This document captures key perspectives from our recent roundtable discussion on the evolving role of CHROs in board governance. Drawing on the experience of Chris Harrison and senior HR leaders, it highlights how CHROs can strengthen their impact at board level, particularly in areas such as succession, strategy, and organisational performance.

COMPANIES REPRESENTED HERE – CHRO & THE BOARD

APCOA PARKING
ASCEND PERFORMANCE MATERIALS
BILFINGER
ELIA
JOHN COCKERILL
KONECRANES
MAHLE
NOKIAN TYRES
PURATOS
SIG COMBIBLOC
STMICROELECTRONICS
TESSENDERLO
TOYOTA
WABTEC
WEBASTO
TECHNOGYM

- ONLY **22%** OF THESE BOARDS FEATURE A CHRO (POSSIBLY!)
- ONLY **12%** OF YOU SIT ON A BOARD!

Looking at the companies and the CHROs represented in this meeting, it seems there is still an opportunity to promote the role of CHRO and its impact vis a vis the governance structure and the Board across all regions for the world.

A key supporting data point:, according to a Conference Board study published in 2025 and quoted by guest speaker Chris Harrison, on a sample of more than 50 American companies, only 39% had CHROs attending every board meeting: out of that number, 20% attending most of the meetings, 22% occasionally, 8% rarely, and 10% never.

So there's clearly a variation across all companies around the world and even “types” of companies with regard to CHRO participation in board meetings, as members of management or as sitting board members.

Chris Harrison, shared his experience under the “umbrella” of a handful of relevant questions posed previously on themes related to the role of the CHRO and the Board:

1. What are the top elements on the minds of boards currently (and how is this relating to human capital?)
2. Your career encompassed a rich mix of operational and functional support roles beyond the HR function. How did those experiences prepare you to be a more influential leader, both in the C-suite, and now as a board director sitting on the other side of the table?
3. As the CHRO role continues to evolve, what do you see as key differentiators for success in influencing both the business outcomes and the board?
4. When considering the requirement to navigate various constituents and key relationships, how were you able to maintain your “independence” of thought and action while balancing those relationships?
5. What final reflections or practical guidance would you offer the group as they return to navigating their own increasingly complex environments?

Chris started by highlighting some of the efforts made to further develop his skills across places in the business where “I wasn’t so comfortable”. To become better, which I still work to do, still learning every single day, I was blessed to have the opportunity to work for companies that allowed me to move in and out of the HR function and also push me to stretch beyond the “traditional”. “This was invaluable and hugely impactful for me now as I sit at the board level with CEO’s, CHROs, CXOs walking into the room.”

The architecture of governance will very often determine whether the C-suite influence is: relationship/leadership driven, institution driven, or consensus driven, recognizing that there’s a diversity of individuals in the session today working with various board structures (whether it’s one tier or two tiers etc.).

The top elements currently in the mind of most boards, especially from a human capital point of view, are pretty commonly spoken lately: economic uncertainty and volatility, shifts in market dynamics, geopolitical uncertainty, AI, cyber risk. Those are some big-ticket items. And those are moving quickly, as we all know. And then there’s that “thing” that they call succession which never goes away. It is interesting and concerning to reflect on what we hear about the number of CEOs and CHROs walking into boardrooms without a real plan around succession. And it’s not necessarily that they’re not trying, or that there isn’t activity happening, but driving something that

is purposeful, repeatable, and actually delivers optimal outcomes. One example, there's a firm that Chris worked with previously. For five years they had been speaking about the succession within one of their portfolio companies, a multi-billion dollar international company. Almost every time they met, they spoke about CEO succession. And yet, the the firm principal would advise me the CHRO and CEO were never coming in with a robust plan. So there was no legitimate backup to the CEO, and most of the C-suite roles had succession that looked like Swiss cheese, and guess what? One day the CEO resigned and then when they started the external search to replace the CEO, two other key leaders followed. . In virtually every situation like this one, it is the board's responsibility as well as the CEO and executive leadership for the shared accountability to ensure that there is a plan.

So what can one do to prepare for being a good advisor (to the Board) as a CHRO?

It seems that companies that figure out that human resources “is” a business enabler, not just a support function, will most often outperform. Chris underlined his attention to observe and learn from the best. As he moved around between functions, seeing a lot of best practices from proven internal experts and the advisors brought in from the outside, he was never afraid to sponge off them to make sure to “keep some of what they brought” to the table after they were gone. Not every CHRO needs to do a line assignment to be effective or “market leading”, but even a special project, or some type of a transformational role can help later with business credibility when you're informing decisions and influencing on more than the people side. There's often this battle heads of HR face of not having the HR stigma: e.g. he or she is just the HR person, let's just give them the execution plan to hire, keep payroll running, own the culture and so forth – while we run the business. It has become impactful and more common for HR leaders to consider themselves as a “business leader” operating in HR vs. only HR and solely focusing on that. Even if it's not a full-time role or an actual assignment, something outside the HR scope can be an enabler to gaining more credibility in the business, the boardroom and with peers. If your peers are with you and the CEO is supporting you, it's a lot easier to drive the agenda. There are often many activities needing additional support in corporate communications, in PR, EH&S, business development as a COE, acquisition integration, and so forth...real opportunities to do something more. Interestingly, the pandemic crisis actually helped put HR even more at the table. There were even people saying “HR became” the table during those times!

Hopefully you don't need to wait for a pandemic to sit at that important table. But you certainly need a CEO and a board that is willing and eager to give the necessary consideration to the HR role. It's a massive enabler. Not all companies are created equal, and that's from the board, from how the CEO looks at human resources, and from the actual quality and level of the HR maturity of the company. So, all of that is definitely at play in each organization – and one size does not fit all. You should also pick your company wisely, having a great company but the wrong board or leader, doesn't help you or the talent agenda. It is important to do proper homework when

considering an organisation around what they actually want or do, what they really mean, what they say. A company may aspire to have the best culture, the best talent, be ready for tomorrow, be agile, but then what are they actually doing and what are they prepared to do?

Most winning CEOs expect to have a CHRO who is viewed as an enterprise leader, not a functional leader, with full engagement and trustworthiness. A trusted internal advisor, and also often playing the role of “additional” eyes and ears for the Board. It has happened to Chris who has recalls earlier in his career receiving phone calls from the chairman or other board members about the CEO during annual assessment times. There are certain companies that will also have the annual CEO appraisal include members of leadership and the CHRO is the lightning rod pulling all of that together. While not always an easy place to be, that is the impactful trusted advisor and enterprise leader CHRO. Additionally, a CHRO who is truly understanding and conversing intelligently on the business, in terms of the strategic plan and how the company creates value. In the old days, HR was “given” the strategic plan. What is needed today is an HR head who sits in the room to support developing the strategic plan, understanding the value creation levers, and how does the company make money, and hopefully being as smart as the CFO about where the cost buckets are. CHROs that differentiate themselves are often the ones “suggesting” changes to the company operating model and organization structure: are we optimal as a division based organization? Should we stay matrix? Should we decentralize? Should we have our functions report to the COO? Being in the middle of those types of topics to help the organisation best deliver on its plans. Last but not least, most of the successes in businesses center around execution – often more than the actual plan.

At the end of the day, there needs to be a talent roadmap or an HR operating system...some type of a framework that is directly tied to the strategic plan of the company. Having the people and culture agenda at the bottom of the one pager strategic plan as an afterthought doesn't do it. Consider having a very project management-based framework for HR underlying the strategic plan, so that all of the resources and talent needed to deliver are legitimately sought after and deployed. There are never too many people and too much money to get things done right? A CHRO needs to have a real tangible human capital plans, under rigorous project management, tight on the controllables, so there is clear understanding about what “we” are signed up for, what the company does need, and our collective ability to measure and prove success. So, project management supporting the operating system is really key because we can control that.....and as we know, the non-controllables are out of our control.

Considering that often a half or two-thirds of total operating costs of a company consists of the people costs, as CHRO you want to be the smartest person in the room, the best subject matter expert on total rewards, being able to speak intelligently about base pay, bonus, long-term incentives, healthcare, retirement plans, sales commissions etc. This is critically important because when there are levers being pulled because there is a need to change things (financially

driven or otherwise), having the CHRO bring real basis behind why we are or aren't at above or below market in a particular area, is crucial, so that decisions get made not by flavour of the day or because your CFO wants to implement an employee stock purchase plan that no one else really values. There are times when the CHRO is asked to save money, whether it is cost reduction around people, cost reduction around benefits plans, efficiencies around bonus levels and equity etc. One can be clever and use the savings "momentum" to justify resources needed in HR to get other HR work done: example: you want to save 1.2 million? Just give me 250K of it back that I need to hire those 2 or 3 key talent acquisition specialists the business needs. Those types of techniques can help the budget discussions become a lot more fruitful and HR become more of an influential player.

One question raised in the session was about the difference between serving as an independent director acting that much as a CHRO versus the CHRO of the company; how could you make sure that you're not overlapping and that you're not somehow replacing the role of the other one or the other one who is holding the job?

The experience of Ursula St. Leger (CHRO) in the Board of Air France confirms the delicate role a CHRO can play in the Boardroom. When several years ago the company was suffering massive strikes and she was recruited as independent director for the Board, taking the opportunity of the governance code requesting to have more women in the Board, and finally with HR competence to help cope with the unions and the work council. Her role was not to play the super HR in the field, but rather bring another way of thinking in the board, the sensibility and a way to look at business. In fact, Ursula joined the Safety Flight Committee of which became chairman, thanks to her curiosity, the capability to ask questions, and even challenging the Board. It's more about the attitude and the mindset of the person than about the background of the experience that the person is bringing.

It is important to avoid that the CHRO of the company does not perceive you, CHRO in the Board, as the super specialist who knows better. Equally important is to keep in mind the different governance models and, even more, the different cultural environment in which CHRO and the Board operate, as rightfully observed by Mirja Becker. The "cultural" theme was further brought up by Mara Zavagno, interested in understanding how can a company, its Board, be influenced towards a more people and culture mentality, where CHRO are considered as assets for their Board because they bring precisely the kind of people and culture competence.

Chris's experience is that more companies are realizing that at the intersections of everything that is happening centers around human capital. It's almost becoming a no-brainer. It's just that the maturity curve takes time. Success stories will produce more success. If you have the ambition to join a Board, use your network. When Chris decided to step down as executive CHRO, he was initially told by privately by some of his closest advisors, that boards aren't really looking for white

males over 55 that are CHROs. This did not deter him and kept pushing, leveraging his network and relationships to find the opportunities.

Governance of a board, whatever that looks like, public, private equity, company and friends is going to dictate the “permission slip” for different executives to be in the room. The general themes learned in public companies, based largely in the US, is that boards “govern”, while companies lead, companies run, companies manage. There's a saying in the US, and also other parts of the world: “nose in, fingers out” when it comes to fiduciary boards. Boards in many cases aren't running the company, management is running the company while boards are advising and governing. Naturally this can vary with family owned, PR and private company settings where boards may be intentionally more operational.

An important piece of advice is whether you feel prepared, in your current CHRO role, in terms of understanding the company, the governance structure, to play an influential role. The curiosity, opening yourself to learn and to get it makes a difference, according to Ursula.

Interesting the point expressed by Mike Clarke, whose CHRO experience indicates that you can make impact if you can deliver confidence to the leadership team, your CEO, and the board, even if you are not invited in, you will be pulled into any kind of forum. The confidence comes from the fact you know what success looks like, whether you're in a PE, whether you're in a promoter-led company, in a big US listed company, you've just got to know what success looks like, and you have to adapt the language you speak to get things done, because when you're working with business leaders, they just need confidence. So whatever you bring into the business is going to help their P&L, and of course, when you're helping the P&L, you're also bringing in the important things around succession, all the things that you talked about and culture and all those kind of things. But the reality, I think, to hit the line running, you've got to get confidence.

Chris added to this excellent point the concept of managerial courage around the role of CHRO, which is especially key when you're presenting to the board a topic that's uncomfortable. One of the more difficult elements of this role is the diplomacy and the savvy and the tact to play that person Mike is talking about, which is sort of serving the CEO, working together with the C-suite, serving the board, leading the company. It takes a lot of time and energy. Chris noted, one way to think of this role is that of a “whisperer”, a fixer, and even a ghostwriter. You can have a lot of positive influence when you are the person that many of the leaders would come to and say, I need your help with the boss or in the boardroom. Managerial courage is something that takes time and your own confidence to be able to go into a room and challenge or even say something provocative.

A couple of stories shared by Chris exemplify this concept directly. One regarding an earlier career decision of a Board to give proper consideration to external research data the board had requested (and was carefully prepared by management). In this particular situation, the board reviewed the data, but didn't necessarily like what it informed, so stuck with their earlier opinion and chose not to incorporate it in the decision. This caused Chris to tactfully say, perhaps next time let's consider saving the money we put into funding the external research if we prefer to go in a certain direction regardless. In a second case, regarding the launch of a new 360 feedback and assessment process to be kicked off for the first time in a large public company, Chris spoke about the fact the C-suite was uncomfortable about participating, but the board was pushing it and he knew it was the right thing to do. Chris and his CEO decided to jump into the 360 process and take the assessments themselves first. They could then share with the board and executive team to set the example, and prove that the "boogeyman" doesn't exist and one does not automatically get fired just because he/she has development gaps and and/or is not perfect.

The direct experience of Sophie Streydio confirms the importance of playing the CHRO role strictly as a business leader and not simply as a subject matter expert, to convince all the key stakeholders (colleagues, CEO, Board) that CHRO can contribute substantially to deliver what is needed to the company, to the growth of the company, by presenting a business case, always talking about numbers, bringing numbers to the table, data not just opinions. HR might not always be the first one to focus on when it comes to tight budget, on the contrary it can make a big change and impact not only at the C level but also at the board level, that how one gets the credibility.

More and more the CHRO needs to be competent and engaging in discussions on all the functions, on the full business, on the total cost in G&A / OPEX , not strictly HR elements to be fixed. Once again, playing such a role requires a good level of business acumen and courage, something that Gualtiero Mago has further underlined, drawing from his diversified experience with private equity owned companies and public companies. A concept that Chris, in his final remark, also emphasized, as he now serves and advises boards that private equity, family owned, an ESOP etc., and has to work purposefully to think a bit differently and balance the way of leveraging his experience and balancing managerial courage according to those different set ups.

Prior to breaking, Chris noted he would share a list of final reflections / practical guidance and tips the group could take away as final thoughts:

- 1.** Understand and accept who you are. So, what are your strengths, where you shine, what are your gaps, where you need help? No one has every answer and boards know that...so the confidence that you are comfortable in your skin with that is a differentiator. Oh by the way, it is not an excuse for not delivering or being versed enough to lead the vitally important function of HR, and to influence and build the right team around you.

- 2.** Work to secure a mentor or two on the board (or maybe even one from outside). Talk to them between meetings, suggest following up with them on a key topic when it is raised during a session. Sit with them at a dinner or after dinner for a cocktail...or breakfast prior to a meeting (I used to do this often with the Comp Committee Chair and Lead Independent Director). Board members come in all shapes and sizes, so use your judgment (and the support of your CEO) to leverage the right one(s).
- 3.** Three - Exhibit managerial courage as a practice and don't automatically fold when challenged. This is tricky in the board room, because confrontation can be uncomfortable and stressful (sometimes career limiting). Remember, that while accepting feedback and allowing board members to "have their day" on a subject is all part of the game....no one really likes "yes" people. Thanking them for the feedback (even if you think it's off the wall or would never work) is a way to diffuse without trying to prove them wrong, or committing to something you will later regret. Picking a battle wisely to later be "right" on, builds credibility and trust.
- 4.** Less is more with presentations, board deck content and slides – this is a very common malady most organizations have to work at. Your time "on stage" is limited and their time is valuable. So, don't overload slides...and certainly avoid "reading" them. Boards can read for themselves, and most will have done pre-work and prepared their questions prior to the meeting. That is often the most valuable part of the meeting, not just getting through the deck. Reducing a pitch from 30 to 10 pages and putting the extra 20 pages in the appendix shouldn't be the automatic fallback either. I recall one time when we had 15 pages to present on a very key topic, never made it past the second slide – but got the recommendation approved!
- 5.** Be selfish with your own growth and learning – work hard to try and get your head out of the sand from time to time and stay current. This is hard...and looking back I wasn't so good at this. It became more obvious to me when I stepped down and had time to stop the "world from spinning" long enough to reflect! No matter how experienced we are, there is always room to grow and get smarter, and it certainly can help you drive your agenda when you are as step ahead of any audience. I was caught "flat footed" a times in my career, and ended up kicking myself for it!.

For further information contact:

Simone Maggioni and Charlotte de Beaufort

smaggioni@ericsalmon.com

cdebeaufort@ericsalmon.com

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