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Talent Solutions for Better Workplaces

Why CHRO Influence Breaks Down in the C-Suite—and How It's Rebuilt

A Four-Part Framework for Shaping Executive
Direction and Driving Alignment

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Table of Contents

Introduction **1**

Why CHRO Influence Is Hard Right Now: Three Patterns **2**

 Pattern 1: Carrying Enterprise Responsibility Without Enterprise Authority 4

 Pattern 2: Trusted One-on-One, Constrained in the Room 6

 Pattern 3: The Translation Problem 8

The CHRO Influence Framework **11**

 Strategy 1: Clarity: Telling the Right Story 12

 Strategy 2: Credibility: Earning the Right to Tell the Enterprise Story 14

 Strategy 3: Connection: Ensuring the Story Is Circulated 17

 Strategy 4: Conversion: Moving the Organization to Act 19

Case in Point **21**

Conclusion **22**





Introduction

The role of the CHRO is reaching an inflection point. Today's CHROs are expected to shape talent strategy, guide AI-enabled workforce transformation, sustain productivity in rapidly changing work environments, steward culture and trust, and advise boards on leadership risk and succession planning. With talent strategy emerging as a top enterprise concern for 2026, many describe this period as a "key moment for the CHRO" ([HR Dive, 2025](#)).

Yet the influence CHROs carry has not always expanded alongside increasing responsibility. In our recent listening tour with more than 100 CHROs across industries and organizational contexts, we heard a consistent and striking refrain: CHROs described elevated burnout, persistent impostor syndrome, and an ongoing struggle to translate people insights into actual change at the C-suite level. These were not early-career leaders expressing uncertainty. They were experienced executives describing a growing gap between what they see as critical issues and what their organizations ultimately act on.

The Cost of Undervaluing CHROs

“The lack of value given to the role is costing us some very talented people. They're burned out. They do feel undervalued and underappreciated.”

CHRO,
Technology Industry

This tension is also visible in the market. Recent reports have found sustained volatility in the role, with high rates of turnover activity ([Russell Reynolds, 2025](#)). While CHROs are more frequently drawn into boardroom discussions, corporate management decisions, and governance structure design, several of them report absorbing heightened expectations for rapid impact without consistent authority to shape direction ([The Conference Board, 2025](#); [SHRM, 2025](#)). The paradox is clear: CHROs are more essential than ever yet limited in the leverage needed to shape enterprise outcomes. Whether or not CHROs can cultivate influence in the C-suite is not a simple matter of authority or access; rather, it reflects a deeper challenge in how organizations understand the role people play in driving enterprise performance.

This paper examines why that understanding breaks down at the executive level, how the resulting misalignment persists, and what it will take to correct it. To explore this dynamic more deeply, Seramount conducted in-depth interviews with four additional CHROs from across industries and organizational contexts. The leaders we spoke with represented a range of tenure profiles, from long-tenured CHROs deeply embedded in their organizations to those navigating greater volatility, transition, and leadership change. What emerged is not a story about individual confidence or communication style, though both of those factors certainly matter. It is, rather, a story about how influence actually is manifested in the modern C-suite and why many CHROs find themselves carrying responsibility without commensurate authority. The sections that follow examine why this breakdown occurs along with how it can be deliberately rebuilt.

Why CHRO Influence Is Hard Right Now: Three Patterns

While talent strategy, leadership transition, and transformation agendas all widen the scope of work and exposure for CHROs, role expansion alone does not explain why influence has become so strained. Trust, leadership, and decision-making now operate under fundamentally different conditions than they did even five years ago.

One CHRO whom we interviewed from the technology industry described the COVID-19 pandemic as “the CHRO’s finest hour”—a period when people leadership moved from the margins to the center of organizational survival.

HR leaders were responsible for:

- Getting employees home safely
- Redesigning work overnight
- Interpreting evolving public health guidance
- Managing unprecedented levels of employee anxiety
- Helping executive teams make decisions with incomplete information

That period of time didn’t just dramatically shift the visibility and expectations of the role; it proved that enterprise decisions of any kind falter when HR and the people they oversee are treated as secondary priorities.

What followed, however, wasn’t a return to balance. Instead, leaders entered a different—and in many ways more difficult—phase

of leadership. CHROs had proven their value under pressure, but proof did not translate into lasting impact. As that same CHRO put it, “After stewarding my organization through the pandemic and still feeling like, ‘I have to convince you of the value of HR?’ Time out, what more do I have to prove?”

When Credibility Still Feels Conditional

“After stewarding my organization through the pandemic and still feeling like, ‘I have to convince you of the value of HR?’ Time out, what more do I have to prove?”

CHRO,
Technology Industry

The aftermath of the pandemic has been even more complex. Organizations are now operating in a prolonged state of disruption, where crisis has given way to constant recalibration.

CHROs are expected to help restore stability while navigating new sources of volatility, including:

- Vast technological transformation
- Ongoing political polarization
- Renewed return-to-office (RTO) debates
- Fast-changing labor, tariff, and regulatory policies

Together, these forces compress decision timelines and compound the human consequences of executive choices.

According to the [2025 Edelman Trust Barometer](#), trust in institutions and senior leadership also remains fragile, which impacts the level of influence CHROs can have. Sixty-one percent of people worldwide feel that governments and businesses make life harder for them while protecting the interests of the already advantaged. In this environment, organizations are expected to act as stabilizing forces while traversing technological, political, and economic tension.

For CHROs, these pressures create a distinct contradiction: CHROs are often among the most trusted figures inside organizations—serving as translators, confidants, and alleviators—yet that trust does not automatically translate into decision authority. In many organizations, CHROs are left to focus on optimizing processes and mitigating fallout instead of addressing the underlying work design issues that promote performance.

Across interviews, three consistent themes emerged that help explain how these conditions amount to a gap in corresponding influence.





PATTERN 1

Carrying Enterprise Responsibility Without Enterprise Authority

The CHROs we spoke with expressed the following core frustration: a fundamental misalignment between business reality and executive mindset.

From a business standpoint, organizations succeed or fail based on their people. Talent quality, leadership capability, engagement, retention, and adaptability are among the most crucial drivers of performance. By that logic, the CHRO sits at the center of enterprise success.

Yet CHROs consistently described a different lived reality.

Despite holding responsibility for the human systems that determine outcomes, interviewees expressed feeling their input was marginalized in practice and often treated as secondary to financial or operational input that dominates executive conversation, even though people power those very outcomes. Several described how this misalignment surfaces when leaders implicitly treat people as interchangeable assets rather than strategic assets.

Central to Success, Marginalized in Practice

“This role is not often valued in the same way that other C-level roles are. It tends to be taken for granted—dismissed. Most organizations thrive and fail based on their people, and the CHRO is responsible for those people. It is a role that should be much more valued.”

CHRO,
Manufacturing Industry

People Are an Investment, Not Merely a Business Line

“People are an investment. I firmly believe we are people-powered. And yet, when I see this mentality of ‘if they don’t like it, they can just leave,’ that’s such a difficult environment to work within.”

CHRO,
Manufacturing Industry



This disconnect is not merely philosophical; it is operational. When people are treated as replaceable, the costs—attrition, disengagement, leadership erosion—do not disappear. They accumulate, and they land disproportionately on the shoulders of HR leaders tasked with steadying the system after the fact.

All the CHROs we interviewed expressed that the gap between responsibility and authority is a primary driver of CHRO burnout. The result of that gap is a role that consistently absorbs risk, manages disruption, and bears the human consequences of business strategy—while having limited impact when it comes to how that strategy is set. In practice, then, CHROs are left to address friction after it appears instead of participating in proactive work design.

Importantly, CHROs did not describe this gap as something solved by “having a seat at the table” alone. Instead, they pointed to a different tipping point: whether “people insights” shaped how decisions were framed in the first place.

What Influence Really Comes Down To

“Influence, to me, isn’t about ego or hoping my C-suite peers respect me. It comes down to whether they understand that the business doesn’t run without its people. That’s why having influence matters so much—the ability to move your executive team to see its people or HR not as a tangential function but the core of why all of this works.”

CHRO,
Consulting Industry

This pattern points to a hard truth: CHRO influence rises or falls based on how people insight is positioned. When it shapes how decisions are framed, influence follows. When it is seen as something HR manages afterward, leverage disappears.



PATTERN 2

Trusted One-on-One, Constrained in the Room

A second, equally consistent pattern which surfaced across interviews is that CHROs are often trusted deeply as individual advisors yet struggle to convert that trust into influence in collective decision-making forums.

In one-on-one settings, the CHROs described being sought out as confidants and advisors. Executives turn to them to gut-check decisions, surface risk, and navigate complexity. In these private conversations, the CHRO's judgment and perspective are eagerly sought out.

Yet some described a stark shift once those same issues entered collective decision-making forums.

Where Trust Works—and Where It Breaks Down

“When I meet with my CEO one-on-one, I feel like that's where I'm at my best. Where I've seen it break down is in the executive team environment.”

CHRO,
Finance Industry

This contrast was not framed as a loss of trust but as a change in context. In executive team meetings, time pressure intensifies, individuals debate priorities, and power dynamics become more pronounced. In those settings, people insights that might have carried weight privately can lose traction publicly.



As a result, interviewees described adapting their approach. Rather than introducing people considerations cold in group settings, they described doing their most influential work prior to the meeting, aligning privately, identifying allies, and shaping narratives in advance. Doing so helps reframe people risks as enterprise problems rather than HR issues to be escalated.

Garnering Support from the Outskirts

“I’ve tried to work outside of the room so I’m not suggesting things flat-footed in a group environment. I try to align, in particular, with my chief growth officer ahead of time. So when we brought something into the C-suite, I would have a co-advocate with me.”

CHRO,
Manufacturing Industry

Several described this work as largely invisible, quietly building consensus, managing executive dynamics, and doing the relational work behind the scenes that allows people insights to surface without derailing the discussion.

Relationships Are the Difference Between Sustainability and Burnout

“You have to have an incredibly good rapport with your C-suite. Otherwise, you won’t be heard. And then you’ll get burned out.”

CHRO,
Technology Industry

Influence, in other words, is built less through formal strategy than through the relational infrastructure that determines whether ideas move. When that infrastructure is strong, people insights travel. When it is weak, CHROs can find themselves incurring disproportionate emotional labor while shouldering responsibility for outcomes they do not fully control or did not get the chance to shape.



PATTERN 3

The Translation Problem

A third pattern surfaced across interviews:

CHROs often see people risks early but struggle to make those risks legible within executive conversations shaped by financial, operational, or technological priorities.

The CHROs we spoke with described C-suite discussions in which leaders were effectively speaking different decision languages, with each being focused on their own function and success metrics. In those moments, people insights were not dismissed outright; they simply failed to be perceived as inputs that should shape how to redesign work.

Translating People Priorities

“Everyone in the room understood their own priorities. But it often felt like they didn’t understand me. The challenge was really translation—getting them to understand why people implications count as decision inputs in a way that they could grasp and mobilize us to act together.”

CHRO,
Manufacturing Industry

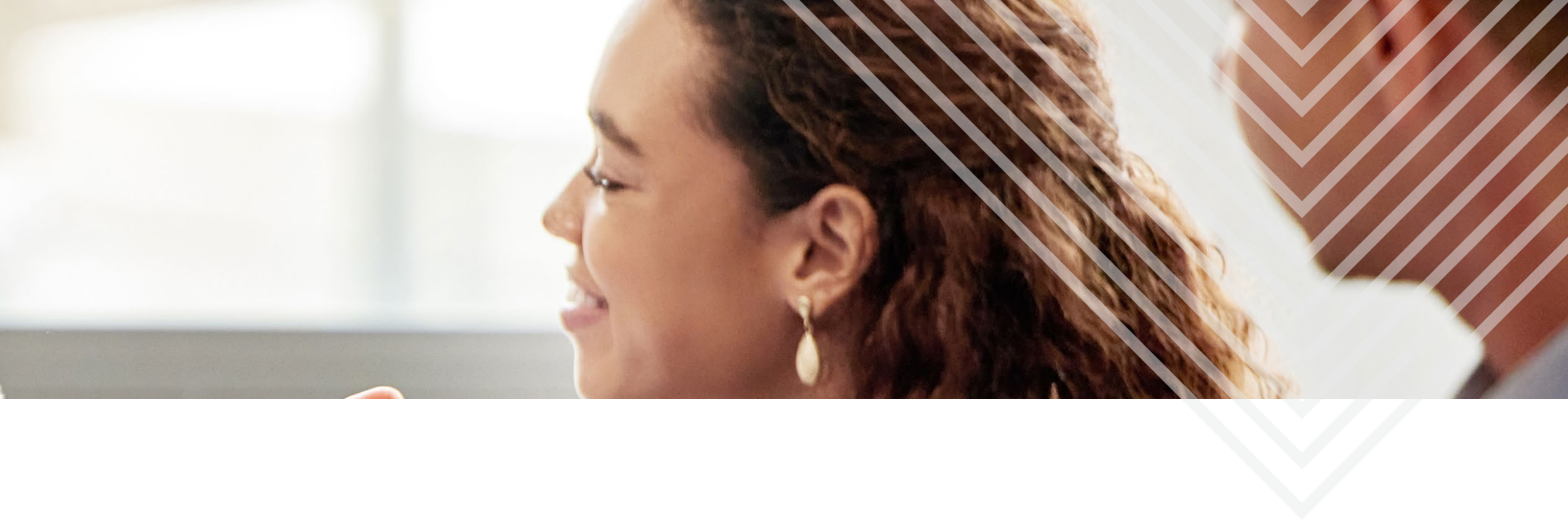
This translation challenge is all about framing. Executive conversations tend to move quickly toward targets, timelines, and deliverables. When people insights enter that flow as part of the background context rather than as part of the decision structure, they are at risk of being sidelined.

Several interviewees noted that people insights lose traction when they are framed primarily as constraints, i.e., what cannot be done, what poses risk, or what might slow progress. Even when accurate, these warnings can stall conversation in environments that tend to prioritize speed and execution.

Having a Solutions Mindset

“I’ve learned that I can’t just say, ‘we can’t do that.’ What I try to do is frame the people implications in the context of the business problem while also providing alternative solutions. So saying things like, ‘we can’t go down A, but we can go down B, and if we do go down B, here’s what might happen and what do you think of that?’”

CHRO,
Finance Industry



What the CHROs described navigating with, then, was not whether leaders cared about people but how people insights were being understood as integral to the decision itself. Several interviewees described stepping in to reorganize the conversation, including interrupting deliberations that were being muddled by individual perspective or opinion to clarify the underlying trade-offs. In those moments, translation meant making explicit what the organization was actually choosing and what that choice would mean for capability, culture, and trust.

Considered together, these patterns explain why influence feels harder for CHROs at precisely the moment it matters most. The constraint is not trust—CHROs often have it. It is not insight—they see problems early and clearly. It is not effort—the role is witnessing unprecedented pressure and CHROs are stepping up. What is breaking down, then, is persuading the C-suite to understand why people insights matter and how they are integral to business outcomes.

Holding up the Mirror

“As a CHRO, I have to be really strategic in terms of how I get my CEO to see the human, organizational implications. While they might want to focus the conversation on trying to hit a sales number, I might have to interrupt and say, ‘Here are the options and here are the talent, culture, and brand implications for all of these things.’ Sometimes I feel like I have to hold up a mirror to my peers and say the quiet thing out loud.”

CHRO,
Technology Industry



The CHRO Influence Framework

The CHROs we spoke with described influence as the work of helping leaders see how people, culture, and capability drive the business and where misalignment quietly undermines execution. Influence, in their telling, was less about advocating for HR priorities and more about shaping how leaders understand the system powering the enterprise.

In practice, this positions CHROs as the organization's most important storytellers—interpreters of how work is designed and optimized, not just stewards of people processes. They connect how strategy lands on the workforce, how work is executed and

experienced across roles and teams, and how those dynamics ultimately affect performance, risk, and growth. In fast-moving environments marked by ambiguity, change, and competing priorities, influence depends on whether CHROs can help leaders see how work *works* and to redesign it when that visibility reveals friction or stagnation.

Analysis of our interviews and supporting research consistently points to four strategies that determine whether people insights shape outcomes or stall in discussion. **Together, these strategies reinforce one another and form the foundation of sustained CHRO influence in the C-suite:**

1

Clarity:

Telling the Right Story

2

Credibility:

Earning the Right to Tell the Enterprise Story

3

Connection:

Ensuring the Story Is Circulated

4

Conversion:

Moving the Organization to Act

STRATEGY 1

Clarity: Telling the Right Story

What CHROs Described

The CHROs we interviewed described clarity as distilling complexity down to the core issue, cutting through noise, eliminating distractions, and presenting leaders with a decision they can actually make. They often see early warning signs across engagement, capability, and culture, but their potential to provide clarity is dependent on how those signals are framed: as constraints on execution or HR data points to be managed.

What the CHROs described needing to do, repeatedly, was not to argue harder for people considerations but to reframe them as business problems. When people insights are positioned as commentary alongside financial and operational updates, they stall. When they are positioned as central to how work actually gets done, they reshape the conversation.

Knowing What “Hat” You’re Wearing

“In executive discussions, I try to be very conscious about which hat I’m wearing ... Am I wearing my head of research hat? Am I wearing my CHRO hat? Or am I wearing my [company] hat?”

CHRO,
Finance Industry

Clarity, then, requires defining the issue at the right level of the system. The CHROs we spoke with described their most influential moments as those where leaders stopped debating HR actions and started grappling with the root causes of less-than-optimal work.

What the Research Shows

Organizational behavior researcher [Karl Weick \(1995\)](#) describes this work as sensemaking: the ability to organize ambiguity into shared meaning that enables action. Leaders do not act because they have more information; they act when they can scan, interpret, and plan. As opposed to prescriptively ascribing meaning, good leaders practice the ongoing act of learning in a complex world, making retrospective sense of past processes while accounting for present behaviors and new context.

Research on cognitive load and executive decision-making explains why this matters. Under time pressure, senior leaders revert to familiar mental models unless new information is explicitly structured into decision-relevant alternatives ([Kahneman, 2011](#); [Bazerman and Moore, 2012](#)).

[Adam Grant’s \(2021\)](#) research further reinforces this point: Leaders are more willing to change their views when insights are framed as invitations to reconsider assumptions rather than as critiques of past decisions. In practice, clarity emerges when people insights illuminate for leaders the problem they are trying to solve.

The Power of Unlearning and Relearning

“The joy of being wrong is the thrill of having learned something new.”

Adam Grant,
Think Again (2021)

What Clarity Looks Like in Practice

THE SITUATION

An executive team accelerates AI adoption to improve productivity and reduce costs. Early pilots show mixed results. Employee sentiment data suggests uncertainty and uneven uptake, which leaders initially interpret as resistance to change.

How Sensemaking Helps Achieve Clarity

	WITHOUT CLARITY	WITH CLARITY
How the issue is framed	AI adoption is treated as a technology rollout that needs more training and encouragement.	AI adoption is described as a business enterprise problem shaped by roles, trust, and performance expectations.
What the CHRO says	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Usage varies across teams. Some experiment following our guidance; others resist or engage in practices outside of our guidance.”• “Employees are uncertain and discontent is growing.”• “Managers need more technical training.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “People don’t know how using AI today will affect their role or credibility tomorrow.”• “Teams are unsure how AI use will factor into performance reviews or advancement opportunities.”• “What looks like slow adoption is really a trust gap about how the work is changing.”
Effect	Leaders push forward on timelines. AI pilots stall, teams disengage, and initiatives are quietly paused or dropped—often misread as resistance or change fatigue rather than a signal of deeper risk.	The conversation productively slows. Leaders weigh trade-offs between speed, role clarity, and long-term ROI, making consequences visible early enough to align expectations and incentives, and manager guidance can be aligned before risks materialize.

What Clarity Means for CHROs

Clarity is created through sensemaking. In practice, effective CHROs do this by:

- **Organizing perspectives into a shared view of the problem,** elevating people insights from anecdote to enterprise narrative.
- **Clarifying the real choices leaders are facing,** surfacing viable paths and the trade-offs each entails.
- **Making consequences visible early,** so leaders understand how today’s decisions shape execution, capability, and risk before outcomes force a reaction.

STRATEGY 2

Credibility: Earning the Right to Tell the Enterprise Story

What CHROs Described

Across interviews, the CHROs emphasized that credibility is built, not assumed. Many described how moving from trusted counselor to authoritative enterprise leader requires deliberate effort regarding how and where they show up in executive conversations.

The CHROs pointed first to deep business fluency. Credibility depends on understanding how value is created, where execution pressure sits, and how decisions ripple across functions, not just how people programs operate. Several described dedicating significant time to learn the business well enough to diagnose how work actually gets done and where friction accumulates.

Know the Business Inside and Out

“You can’t advise if you don’t know what the different roles are and who the players are. You have to know where value is created, where decisions get stuck, and how roles interact, not just what an org chart says.”

CHRO,
Consulting Industry

Beyond business fluency, the CHROs described early pattern recognition as a core source of credibility. While business leaders may encounter a people challenge once or twice, CHROs often see the same dynamics repeat across cycles, teams, and transformations. As one CHRO put it: “They’ve seen this once. HR has seen it five times.” Several spoke about actively claiming that experience, particularly when there is risk of their perspective being treated as a secondary one.

Finally, interviewees emphasized that credibility is also enacted in the room. It is signaled through presence, steadiness, and the confidence to speak system-level consequences. In high-stakes settings, credibility is felt as much as it is reasoned.

What Credibility Feels Like in the Room

The last piece I’d add is presence—you have to have a certain amount of gravitas. Authenticity. That matters too. Inspiring confidence. People need to feel that in order to trust you as a leader.”

CHRO,
Technology Industry

What the Research Shows

Research in social psychology and leadership helps explain why credibility must be actively cultivated in executive settings.

[Susan Fiske's \(2018\)](#) research on warmth and competence shows that leadership influence depends as much on emotional intelligence as business acumen. Leaders perceived as warm but insufficiently competent are liked but underestimated; those perceived as competent but distant are respected but not relied upon. Credibility emerges when leaders consistently demonstrate both warmth and competence.

Power dynamics further shape whose insights carry weight. [Rosalind Chow \(2025\)](#) finds that people in lower-power roles often restrict their contributions to “safe” domains to avoid confrontation or reputation risk. Those who cultivate influence expand their perceived permission to contribute by claiming relevance beyond functional boundaries.

Finally, leadership research shows that authority is enacted, not assigned. Building on the goal of striving for clarity, credibility in senior groups emerges through framing, fluency, and role-claiming—not title alone ([Magee and Galinsky, 2008](#)).



What Credibility Looks Like in Practice

THE SITUATION

After reviewing uneven AI adoption, the executive team debates whether adoption challenges reflect temporary change friction or a deeper execution risk. The CHRO enters the conversation armed with people insights. Whether or not they shape the decision depends on credibility.

How Credibility Shapes Influence

	WITHOUT CREDIBILITY	WITH CREDIBILITY
How the CHRO shows up	The CHRO is perceived as a functional advisor raising people concerns.	The CHRO is recognized as an enterprise leader interpreting how work design affects execution.
What the CHRO says	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Employees are hesitant about AI.”• “We’re seeing adoption challenges and growing resistance.”• “Managers are noticing that their teams are abandoning pilots and also using AI in unsanctioned ways.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Adoption is stalling in revenue-critical roles where AI changes how performance is evaluated. Cross-functional sales and marketing teams are not aligned in usage.”• “We saw this same pattern during the CRM rollout—it cost us two quarters of productivity.”• “If we don’t reset expectations and redesign workflows now, we should expect uneven ROI and higher attrition.”
Effect	People insights are acknowledged as context and supporting detail, then set aside as execution continues. Decisions prioritize speed and cost. HR is asked to manage downstream impact once direction is set.	The people story helps define the decision itself. Leaders weigh how people dynamics will enable—or undermine—business strategy. The CHRO is recognized as a system leader shaping how the organization responds.

What This Means for CHROs

Credibility determines who gets to tell the story that shapes decisions and whether people insight is treated as central rather than ancillary. When credibility is present, people insights stop sounding like advocacy. They function as business intelligence and, as such, earn a place in shaping direction. In practice, CHROs described greater influence when they:

- **Spoke in enterprise language**, linking people dynamics directly to execution, risk, and value creation.
- **Used pattern recognition** to show leaders what tends to happen next, not just what is happening now.
- **Claimed their role as enterprise leaders**, redesigning work rather than managing consequences after the fact.

STRATEGY 3

Connection: Ensuring the Story Is Circulated

What CHROs Described

The CHROs we interviewed consistently described influence as something that rarely originates in formal meetings. Instead, they emphasized the work required to ensure that people insights move forward, progressing from individual understanding to collective ownership.

This strategy was not described as political maneuvering or avoidance of the room. Rather, it reflected a realistic understanding of executive dynamics: Ideas do not move simply because they are accurate; they move when others are prepared to carry them. Without circulation, even credible and well-framed people insights can stall once decisions move beyond the meeting.

Several of the CHROs described this work as rooted in a deep awareness of the networked and interdependent nature of work. By calibrating timing, tone, and audience, they helped people insights circulate without triggering defensiveness or fragmenting alignment. This sensitivity to how leaders, functions, and priorities intersect is what allows influence to travel when it matters most.

What the Research Shows

Research on networks and psychological safety explains why this relational work matters.

Amy Edmondson's landmark book, [*The Fearless Organization*](#), shows how leaders are more likely to surface, reinforce, and act on insights when doing so does not carry disproportionate interpersonal risk. In senior teams shaped by hierarchy, reputation, and speed, that willingness cannot be assumed. It must be cultivated.

Ideas, in other words, gain traction not through formal authority alone but through networks of trust and shared ownership ([Ibarra, 2015](#)). Influence grows when leaders enable others to carry, reinforce, and legitimize a narrative across boundaries rather than attempt to advance it alone.

Make People Issues Everyone's Issues

“The ‘C’ connotes that you have responsibilities for the overall company. So, HR problems in my organization are everyone's problems—the whole executive team—as a single body operating in the best interest of the company. If it were a finance issue, my peers would be involved. If it were a sales issue, my peers would be involved. Why wouldn't they be involved in an HR issue, especially when 90 percent of all costs are people? We don't produce any value without people.”

CHRO,
Finance Industry

What Connection Looks Like in Practice

THE SITUATION

The executive team is debating how aggressively to push AI adoption. The CHRO has framed the issue clearly and has credibility in the room. The remaining question is whether that insight actually is circulated—or remains dependent on the CHRO alone to carry it.

How Connection Shapes Influence

	WITHOUT CONNECTION	WITH CONNECTION
How the CHRO prepares	The CHRO brings people insights into the executive meeting without prior alignment.	The CHRO builds shared understanding ahead of the meeting through targeted one-on-ones with key executives.
What the CHRO says	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “We’re seeing adoption challenges tied to role uncertainty.”• “There are risks to pushing too fast.”• “If this resonates, I’m happy to follow up or help communicate this with the teams.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “I’ve spoken with Finance and Operations, and we’re seeing the same adoption risk in revenue-critical roles.”• “This isn’t just an HR concern; it’s an execution risk we all share.”• “If this resonates, I’d like us to carry it together when we talk about next steps.”
Effect	The insight lands for the first time and remains advisory and HR-owned. Leaders process it individually. Momentum favors speed over alignment, and human implications resurface later as downstream friction.	Peers reinforce and share the people considerations. Leaders co-advocate for alignment before acceleration. The insight feels familiar and legitimate, and influence circulates beyond the CHRO and holds after the meeting.

What This Means for CHROs

Connection is the mechanism that turns influence from a personal capability into an organizational one. In practice, CHROs described greater traction when they:

- **Seeded insight early**, before positions hardened and momentum took over.
- **Identified natural co-owners**, so people risks were carried by the enterprise team, not isolated within HR.
- **Worked with interdependence**, introducing people implications in ways that strengthened alignment rather than disrupted it.

STRATEGY 4

Conversion: Moving the Organization to Act

What CHROs Described

Across interviews, the CHROs described what concerned them most was not whether actions were being taken but whether their influence was shaping the long-term trajectory of the organization.

Many described executive conversations dominated by immediate pressures—quarterly targets, operational constraints, or urgent disruptions—without a shared view of the workforce the organization was intentionally building. In those conditions, people considerations were evaluated in isolation rather than as part of a coherent direction.

Thinking Long-Term

“ I stopped measuring success by whether we took action and started measuring it by whether our organization decisions were moving us in a consistent direction. Influence works when people concerns become the compass, not a checkpoint to hit.”

CHRO,
Technology Industry

The CHROs who described greater influence did not focus on pushing forcefully on any given action. Instead, they focused on making direction explicit, using people insights to clarify where the organization was headed and allowing that future intent to guide decisions over time.

What the Research Shows

Research on decision-making and strategy helps explain why CHROs so often see movement without momentum: Under sustained pressure, organizations default to incremental, short-term choices unless leaders actively anchor decisions to a clear future state ([Rumelt, 2011](#)). Without that anchor, leaders solve the problem in front of them while drifting away from any coherent direction.

Organizational change research further shows that people commit to action when decisions are embedded in a shared story about where the organization is going, not simply what must be done next ([Kotter, 2012](#)). When future intent remains implicit, responsibility is diffused and action is fragmented, even when leaders agree in principle ([Thaler & Sunstein, 2021](#)).

Conversion, in other words, is not about more action. It is about direction that decisions can build on.

What Conversion Looks Like in Practice

THE SITUATION

The executive team is managing multiple, competing priorities—AI adoption, productivity pressure, leadership transitions—while responding to near-term performance demands. Decisions are being made, but they are not clearly reinforcing one another.

How Conversion Shapes Influence

	WITHOUT CONVERSION	WITH CONVERSION
How issues are presented	Each issue is treated as a stand-alone problem requiring a discrete response.	Decisions are evaluated against a shared view of the workforce the organization is building.
What the CHRO says	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “We should take action on this initiative.”• “Here’s the next step we can implement.”	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Before we decide, let’s be clear on the workforce we’re trying to build.”• “Which option moves us closer to that, and which one risks introducing friction later?”
Effect	Leaders agree on actions but revisit the same debates quarter after quarter. Activity increases, but momentum does not. Initiatives compete rather than compound. People insights resurface repeatedly but fail to shape direction.	Leaders pressure-test decisions against future intent and begin aligning choices over time, reinforcing one another. Trade-offs become clearer and can be resolved faster. People insights act as a compass, guiding choices over time.

What This Means for CHROs

In practice, CHROs described greater impact when people insights were used to:

- **Define the kind of workforce the organization is intentionally building**, not just the initiatives underway.
- **Evaluate decisions against that future state**, rather than reacting to pressure in the moment.
- **Shift conversations from “what should we do now?” to “what are we becoming?”**

When conversion works, HR stops functioning as a cost to manage and starts functioning as a capability the business relies on, shaping how work is designed, how skills are deployed, and how value is created.

CASE IN POINT

Moving from Reactive to Strategic by Establishing a Workforce North Star

When working toward the ultimate goal of conversion, one CHRO we spoke with described a persistent challenge: the constant pull toward reaction. They described how this dynamic came to a head following a period of significant organizational change. After merging with a new parent company, the organization faced competing priorities, legacy cultures, and fragmented expectations about performance and growth. Rather than arbitrating individual people decisions one by one, the CHRO helped the executive team step back and reset the story they were telling about the future.

Identifying a Workforce North Star

“We were struggling to find coherence in our new blended culture, so much so that it felt like we were constantly talking in circles. Finally, I sat down with the CEO of our new parent company and said, ‘What if we forced ourselves to make ten statements describing the workforce we want to have in five years—and aligned the executive team around that?’”

CHRO,
Finance Industry

That exercise reframed the work. Instead of debating individual initiatives, the leadership team was asked a more fundamental question: Who are we trying to become—together?

That future-facing narrative became a reference point for present decisions:

- Does this productivity push align with the workforce we say we want?
- Does this AI rollout build the capabilities we’ll need or undermine trust?
- Does this leadership decision strengthen or weaken the culture we’re aiming to build?

In effect, the North Star exercise gave people insights a strategic home.

Establishing a workforce North Star aligns closely with Simon Sinek’s (2025) research on purpose-driven leadership. In [Start with Why](#), Sinek shows that organizations are most effective when decisions are anchored not just in what they are doing but in why they are doing it, when action is guided by a shared sense of direction rather than a series of disconnected choices.

Start with Why

“People don’t buy what you do; they buy why you do it.”

Simon Sinek,
Start with Why

Culminating in conversion, a workforce North Star is the point at which influence is sustained. It works only when clarity, credibility, and connection are already in place—when the people story is understood, trusted, and carried by others. At that point, influence stops showing up as one-off wins and starts shaping how decisions reinforce one another over time. This is the point at which the CHRO role shifts from managing people systems to redesigning how work actually gets done.

CONCLUSION

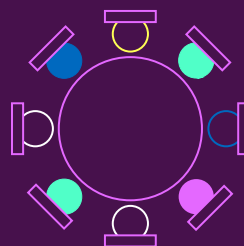
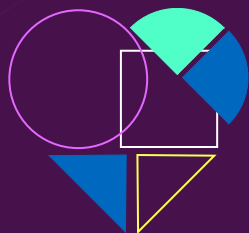
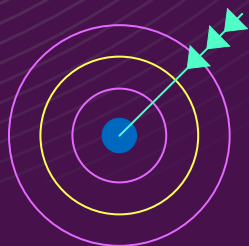
The Cost of Silence and the Need for Sustained Influence

When CHRO influence breaks down, the cost is rarely immediate. It shows up over time—in decisions that underestimate human consequences, in cultural erosion that becomes normalized, and in productivity efforts that strain trust rather than strengthen it. These effects are compounded quietly, often long after initial decisions were made. Under these conditions, influence is not something that can be improvised in the moment; it must be built deliberately and sustained over time.

The framework outlined here takes that challenge one step further. It suggests that influence is the cumulative effect of clarity, credibility, connection, and conversion working together. When these elements reinforce one another, people insights stop competing for attention and start shaping direction, giving CHROs long-lasting influence over the organization's trajectory, not just episodic wins.

But this kind of influence is difficult to build in isolation. As [Russell Reynolds \(2025\)](#) observes, CHROs often serve as a stabilizing force for other leaders while lacking comparable spaces to test thinking, pressure-test narratives, and learn from peers facing the same constraints. As one CHRO we interviewed observed: "The CHRO is the heartbeat of an organization. They take care of everyone, but there's often not anyone left to take care of them." Without that support, even strong individual capability can erode under pressure.

The future of the CHRO role will not be defined by louder voices or stronger persuasion. It will be defined by CHROs who invest in the systems, relationships, and communities that make influence sustainable—so that the organization's story becomes a shared North Star guiding decisions across the enterprise.



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