

CORNELL HR REVIEW

A HUMAN RESOURCES PERSPECTIVE FROM THE C-SUITE: AMERICAN EXPRESS

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Kevin Cox, the Executive Vice President of Human Resources for American Express, presented in a Fall 2011 graduate course on leadership at the ILR school, appropriately named View From the Top. The presentation began by focusing on how American Express utilizes pioneering technologies to continuously innovate within the business and shape the direction of the company. More specifically, the focus of the presentation was the new business unit of American Express called the Enterprise Growth Group. The conversation then transitioned into teaching the class about the roles of a CHRO and the lessons he has learned through his career.

The Enterprise Growth Group at American Express was created to do exactly what its title alludes to, grow the American Express enterprise. One of the group's first ventures is a business called Serve. Their take on a digital wallet, Serve is a new way to send money virtually via a website or smart phone. Cox went on to discuss the business case for why American Express is moving into online payments, what Serve's business model is, and Serve's newly announced plans and partnerships. Enterprise Growth Group's proposal and development of Serve was the biggest career risk Cox said he had taken to date. The story of Serve's development and launch led into the main reason for Cox's appearance in class, to share with aspiring HR leaders what it is really like to be a CHRO.

Cox talked about being a CHRO in terms of their relationships and roles. He shed light on the many matrixed relationships a CHRO has with the CEO, the fellow C-suite members, the board, the HR department, and all other company employees. The importance of being objective, having a strong moral compass, and using sound judgment when dealing with various stakeholders were also presented as key skills. He then broke the CHRO position into four key roles: Architect, Troubleshooter, Culture Cop, and Coach, and discussed the importance of fulfilling each.

The Architect. Cox openly shared his views on how important talent is to any organization. One of his core beliefs is "great talent trumps great strategy, every time." The architect role is not just about hiring the right people; it is about designing a workforce that can achieve the company's goals. A CHRO must do this by linking the talent strategy to the business strategy.

The Troubleshooter. Quoting Michael Feiner, Cox stated, "Organizations fundamentally don't work." This leaves a lot of work for the CHRO to do and Cox categorized the major problems a CHRO will have to trouble shoot into eight buckets: leadership, roles, goals, capability, communication, standards, structure, and of course, compensation.

The Culture Cop. A company’s brand and culture are sacred. This is especially true of historic companies such as American Express, which has been in operation since 1850. Cox discussed the importance of first understanding the essence of a culture and then how important it is to protect it. He shared how every decision and action impacts the culture, thus making it critical to understand what behaviors to accentuate, minimize, or eliminate to keep the company’s value system and culture aligned. He also stressed that every deviation from tradition must be a well thought out, conscious decision.

The Coach. In his role, Cox is a coach to many. He emphasized again the importance of staying objective, but also discussed what “tough love” means in the CHRO role. He spoke about the importance of being a good listener and not becoming part of the story, and lastly, knowing when to coach and when to substitute.

To close his lecture, Cox shared some lessons he has learned from his experiences. He told the class that HR should always be driving change, not impeding it. He explained why it is important to become a harsh evaluator of talent and also why students should chose optimism over cynicism. In the last minutes of his presentation, Cox imparted some wisdom that every aspiring leader should keep in the back of their mind when beginning their career, “Don’t just stand there. Do something. Engage.”

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