



The “North Star” of a Clear People Strategy

An Interview with **Chris Cowan**, Senior Vice President of Human Resources at **Christiana Care**

*The Executive Team at Christiana Care knew that a key part of executing the 3-year business strategy was taking a very deliberate look at their Talent Agenda to ensure alignment and focus. They partnered with PeopleFirm to embark on a multi-phase effort, the first of which was the articulation of a clear People Strategy. **Scott Perkins of PeopleFirm** recently sat down with Chris Cowan, Sr. VP of HR for Christiana Care to discuss the progress made to date and where they are headed.*

Tell us a little bit about your organization, the situation and challenges you were facing as you went down the path of articulating a People Strategy.

I think that it really was two-fold: First, at the organizational level and then the second piece was from a pure Human Resources lens.

At the organizational level, we had just finished considerable work on our 3-year strategic plan and we knew that our people are the key resource to execute on that plan so we knew that we had to be thoughtful about how we engage and deploy them, and that it would be critical to our success moving forward.

From the HR perspective, I took a step back and looked all the projects and initiatives that we had going on within HR. We had a lot of good stuff going on, but the question that I had to ask was, “is this the right stuff?” I felt very strongly that the work that HR does and the work our learning arm does really belonged to a bigger picture and that was rooted in the organization’s strategy. So that was really the background of why we began this journey.

As you step back now, what did you see as the primary value of going through that process to essentially put a “stake in the sand” around where you were headed?

I’d say that one significant value of the process of being deliberate about developing a people strategy was awareness. We had never previously talked about having a People Strategy. After a short education period with my colleagues and the C-suite, they became pretty excited about the idea of having a People Strategy and being deliberate about what we are doing around our people. At Christiana Care, we truly believe that our people make us who we are at the end of the day. Our primary focus as an organization ultimately is to take care of the individuals in the communities that we serve and we need our people to do that and do it well.

Another value of a People Strategy is that it provides a “North Star” for us, and provides a mechanism for us to prioritize requests and programs. Like many organizations, we have a finite amount of resources that we can allocate and it gives us a way to prioritize. I believe that where there is focus, you will get momentum. So instead of diluting your resources and doing a little bit of everything, do fewer things and do them really, really well.

Basically, an impactful **people strategy** is the decoder ring that **connects the dots** between your **business strategy** and your **human resource strategy**, balancing a **Win-Win** mindset.

The individual and the organization can benefit together.

As you went through the process with PeopleFirm to develop your People Strategy, what surprises or challenges did you encounter?

The biggest challenge was getting people to think about People Strategy beyond traditional HR. *We needed people to understand and realize that it is not an HR thing but rather, the People Strategy should be owned by the executives and the C-suite.* Sure, a piece of it is HR and so you need to clarify the role of HR, but you also need to be clear about the role of the leadership team, as well as the role of the employees within all their functions. For me, getting people to think beyond that and in a more cross-functional way when it comes to our people was the biggest challenge.

Another challenge was in educating people on traditional talent imperatives that we covered throughout the process and getting their heads wrapped around that to realize that it truly does have an impact on the bottom line of the organization.

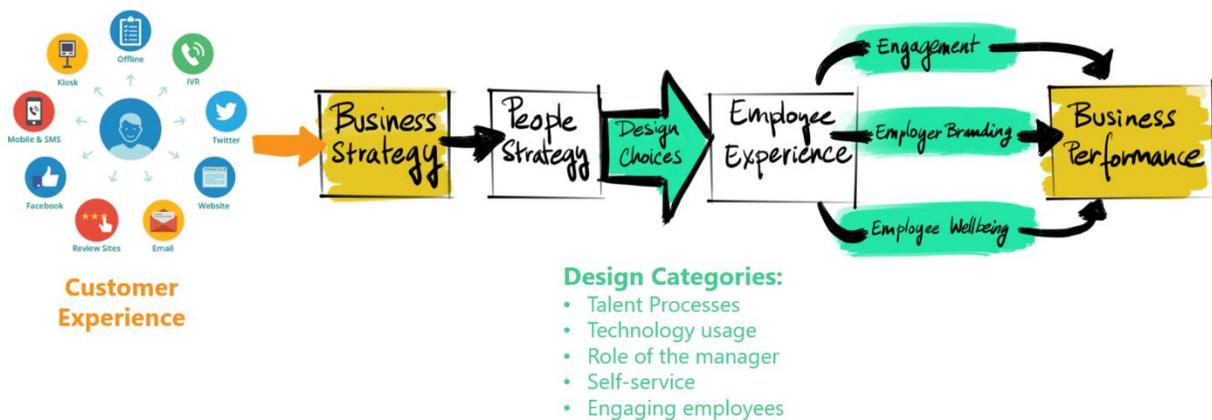
If your colleagues from another organization were about to embark on this process of developing a People Strategy, what are some key lessons learned you would share?

I think the biggest lesson for me, which quite frankly I didn't really think about nor fully understand when I began this journey, is really the importance of being able to tell a story. When I reflect on the process, the biggest lesson is that you need to tell a story in such a way that resonates. Your People Strategy needs to go well beyond a 20-slide PowerPoint deck or a series of bullet points and objectives in a Word document. The biggest thing I learned was how important it is to be able to tell a powerful story to evoke emotion and facilitate understanding. For us, our story is distinct in that we believe we are already a great

organization and that in order to get to the next level of where we need to be in healthcare, we need to unleash the potential of our caregivers. And to do that, we need to be very deliberate about the experience we are going to create for them. We believe that our caregivers' experience has a directly impact on our patients' experience.

Although that seems like a pretty simple story to tell, it took a lot of work to get to that story and be very deliberate about what it was. Strategy is about focus- about making choices about what you will and won't focus on, and that story is a result of the choices we made.

“You need to tell a story in such a way that it resonates”



As you start to move away from this phase (of aligning on priorities) and move toward strategy execution, what will be the success criteria to make that leap and drive toward execution?

I think there are two things that are most important to getting us through the transition. First, making sure we have clear objectives and tasks to bring our roadmap to fruition. And second along with that is in being very clear about what metrics we are going to monitor along the way. We need to have clear metrics around key aspects of our roadmap and our 3-year journey to keep this top of mind for executives. This will include regular updates so they can be monitoring those metrics and keeping this conversation at the forefront.

Is there anything else you would like to share or offer? Perhaps wisdom to others as they go forward and think about their People Strategy?

For those who want to embark upon the process of articulating and executing a People Strategy, there are a couple things I think really need to be in place:

- First, a clear understanding of who your organization really is, the goals you want to achieve, and the mission of the organization. That has helped us a great deal in the beginning to provide clarity about how to prioritize as an organization.
- Next, having very strong core values as an organization – and this is beyond what's on a piece of paper, but the ones the organization has truly bought into and choose to live out each day. This will also help a great deal with this journey.

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I think the other advice for HR leaders (as they are the ones driving this), is that it is important to be flexible in your thinking and the way you see the world. A key aspect from my lens is HR leaders need to see themselves as the curator of the strategy, not the owner. That is a key distinction in this process. HR cannot own this, rather HR should be facilitating. Because where you are going to get momentum and buy-in is when your colleagues in the C-suite truly see themselves as accountable to making sure the People Strategy is executed and executed well.

The last piece of advice I'd share is that as you are bringing your colleagues together, make sure you invest in your relationships. The relationships you have with your stakeholders are critical. You will need to help people understand the direction you want to go when they are struggling and take time to listen to them. These relationships will go a long way in getting their support and helping reach the ultimate goals.

Thanks so much for your time, Chris!



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