

The HR Personality

Data compiled exclusively for HRE suggests that while HR leaders share many personality traits with others in the C-suite, there are some key differences that could impact your effectiveness.

By Scott Flander

Certainly, career experience, skills and competencies are important components. But what about personality -- could that be a factor as well? Could one's inclinations and preferences, one's natural comfort level with certain activities, play a role in the job of HR?

Human Resource Executive® ventured to find that out by asking several leading assessment firms to take a look at the similarities and differences between the personalities of HR executives and leaders of other business functions, such as sales, marketing, finance and operations. At our request, the firms pulled data from thousands of personality tests given to HR executives -- mostly vice presidents and above -- over a number of years.

The results might surprise you.

Although the assessment firms all use different methods to look at personality, their findings were remarkably similar. In most -- though not all -- ways, HR executives and other executives are very much alike, according to the data. For example, they're equally good at thinking strategically.

But it's where the two groups diverge that the real difference becomes apparent.

HR executives score much higher in traits such as empathy and consideration for others, [according to the data](#) . They tend to be more intuitive, and have a deeper understanding of how others see the world. They favor teamwork over a star environment, and are better at building trust and relationships, and in finding common ground.

At the same time, the data suggests human resource leaders as a group are less competitive than the other executives; they're also less likely to exhibit some of the more unfriendly traits, such as intimidation, manipulation and passive-aggressiveness.

And they're less inclined to be the types of people who will sacrifice the needs of the organization for their own needs.

So what does all this mean? Perhaps not much. Several top HR executives we interviewed for this story say they don't believe personality plays much of a role in HR, at least at large corporations, where global challenges and demands already dictate the

need for business-minded, strategic leadership.

And certainly, many HR executives are just as competitive as other C-suite officers in their companies.

But psychologists inside and outside the assessment firms say HR executives who fit this profile may have a tougher time selling their ideas to CEOs and other leaders -- and making their voices heard.

They also say that doesn't have to be the case. According to them, while you can't change your personality, you can adapt your behavior and, if you understand your own personality and how you might differ from your executive peers, you can use that knowledge to your advantage.

A New Idea

Usually, discussions about how HR might be more effective have to do with ways the profession is changing, and whether HR leaders have the career experience they need to be full strategic partners. Personality is rarely raised as part of the equation.

"I've never really thought about it," says Richard Marcus, a longtime psychologist who is now an executive coach based in Philadelphia. When told of the assessment data, however, he said, "I'm not surprised. It makes sense to me."

Compared with experience, personality is a much more entrenched part of who we are. It has to do with how comfortable we are at doing certain things. It's about our preferences and inclinations, and how we deal with other people.

"It's like a lens -- it changes the way you see the world," says Heather Ishikawa, a senior consultant with the Mountain View, Calif.-based assessment firm CPP. "In that first moment that you respond to a situation, it's how you respond."

Of the dozen or so assessment firms we contacted for this story, five had what they said was enough data to provide meaningful results. There were a variety of sample sizes. CPP, for example, pulled its data from the assessments given to nearly 1,600 HR vice presidents and about 9,200 vice presidents of other functions. Saville Consulting looked at a smaller group, taking data from 116 HR vice presidents and 524 non-HR vice presidents.

Typical of the findings were those by CPP. The firm looked at data from three types of assessments -- which each measure personality in a different way -- and came up with essentially the same results.

Using the widely known Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, the firm found that, for the most part, HR vice presidents and vice presidents of other functions, such as sales, finance, marketing, purchasing and general operations, have similar personalities. All types of vice presidents, for example, tend to be extroverted rather than introverted.

But there is a key difference: HR executives are much more likely to have a "feeling" rather than a "thinking" preference.

While a person with a thinking preference tends to make objective and impersonal decisions based on logic and reason, someone with a feeling preference will focus on how a decision will affect the people involved, says Michael Anderson, a research scientist at CPP. A person with a feeling preference also tends to make decisions based on personal or social values.

A second type of assessment, the CPI 260, found that HR vice presidents and other vice presidents share 19 of 20 types of characteristics, such as levels of responsibility, self-control, insightfulness and independence. But HR vice presidents tend to score much higher with the personality trait of "sensitivity."

This gives them a great many strengths: HR executives are better at maintaining morale, identifying stakeholders, building trust and finding common ground, says CPP's Ishikawa.

At the same time, says Anderson, the other vice-presidents tend to be more tough-minded, and take more of a no-nonsense approach. HR executives are more concerned about the feelings of others, and so may avoid making difficult or unpopular decisions, he says.

A third assessment tool used by the firm is the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument, which looks at how people handle conflict. According to the data, all executives start out being collaborative. When there's a dispute, everyone wants "win-win." But if that isn't possible, the other executives are more likely to push for their own proposals at the expense of others' ideas, says Ishikawa, whereas HR vice presidents tend to be less competitive.

"They attempt to satisfy their teammates' concerns at the expense of their own," she says.

Different Drivers

Another assessment firm, Personnel Decisions International of Minneapolis, looked at data from its Global Personality Inventory test given to business leaders in HR and in other functions.

It found that HR executives score significantly higher than the other executives in personality traits such as self-awareness, optimism and sociability, and even higher in the areas of empathy and consideration for others.

At the same time, HR executives scored significantly lower in three traits: manipulation, passive-aggressiveness and intimidation.

Diane Nilsen, the firm's vice president of research, says that the other business leaders tend to have more of a "hard-driving, get-results-at-any-cost orientation."

Data from Saville also suggests HR executives may not be as naturally business-driven as other executives. HR leaders are significantly less "enterprising" -- a personality trait that measures a person's interest and comfort level with sales and commercial activity, says Gary Schmidt, an industrial and organizational psychologist and president of Saville's U.S. operations, based in Hightstown, N.J. Schmidt's firm uses the Saville Consulting Wave, which measures a person's "preferred work personality."

Hogan Assessments of Tulsa, Okla., also found several key differences between HR vice presidents and other vice presidents.

In personality tests that the firm has administered, the other vice presidents scored significantly higher in the trait "ambition," which refers to a person's drive and competitiveness, and his or her passion for being in charge, says Ryan Ross, an industrial psychologist and senior consultant at Hogan.

HR leaders tend more to be team players, more interested in consensus-building, and more willing to engage in give-and-take, he says. "You're not pushing and shoving, playing the political game fighting your way to the top," says Ross. "It's not that your idea has to win, it's what's better for the organization."

But the flip side of that trait, he says, is that human resource leaders might be less willing to step up and take the topmost, harder-driving leadership role -- "they're willing to let others do that."

HR leaders also score higher in a personality trait known as "prudence," which means they're less impulsive and pay more attention to detail. They are also much more practical, says Ross.

While other vice presidents are more likely to try new things and make radical changes, HR executives are less willing to put their organizations at risk, he says.

Conflicting Views

While much of this data may suggest HR executives aren't as tough-minded as other business leaders, some top HR executives, such as Libby Sartain, the chief people officer at Yahoo!, don't agree. At least at the top *Fortune* 500 companies, she says, "I don't see anybody who's not tough-minded or business-minded."

And, she says, HR leaders don't have to be confrontational or divisive to be effective.

"You can't do this job effectively if you leave dead bodies in your path," says Sartain, whose company is based in Sunnyvale, Calif. If HR doesn't always go to the mat for its ideas, she says, that's often because "HR may not own the final decision."

And if anything, she says, HR's personality traits are keys to its success. Those traits suggest that HR is "better able to come up with a win-win" and deal with conflict in a healthy way.

Data from Caliper of Princeton, N.J., does confirm that top human resource leaders share more hard-driving qualities with their C-suite counterparts than those further down the line in the profession.

Herb Greenberg, president of Caliper, compared 50 HR vice presidents with 30 lower-level HR managers and about 80 non-managers. His findings: Compared with others in the profession, HR vice presidents are more assertive, less cautious, less rules-driven and more innovative, and have a stronger sense of urgency.

That's how they got to where they are, he says -- that's why they're vice presidents. But, he says, they still carry with them a common HR personality trait, which he calls "accommodation."

"They want to please, they want you to like them," says Greenberg. "They have the drive to get the thank-you, to have someone say, 'You really came through for me.' Most leaders don't have a great deal of this, but HR leaders do."

That personality trait is a great HR strength, says Greenberg, because it helps build trust and relationships. But if HR executives are dominated by the need to please, "it can keep them from being enfolded into strategic planning," he says. "If you want to please, you're going to be a little more hesitant to say something radically different than what someone else on the board is saying."

Although HR vice presidents tend to be more accommodating than vice presidents in other functions, the vast majority aren't dominated by the trait, says Greenberg. "The vast majority are at that level because they're balanced," he says.

Bonnie C. Hathcock, senior vice president and chief people officer for Humana, based in

Louisville, Ky., believes HR leaders can and should be "bold."

"Part of it is internal wiring, and it's also being grounded in what you believe is your purpose in the HR enterprise, and being emboldened to go after that," she says. "I really do believe that HR executives for very large corporations think this way."

Like Sartain, Hathcock doesn't believe HR should emulate the tough-guy approach. "I don't think it's our role to be hard-nosed," she says. "It's our role to bring a balanced perspective."

Some Similarities

A sixth assessment firm, Somerville Partners of Denver, looked at HR executives with a somewhat different approach -- but came to similar conclusions.

Using its Leadership Style Inventory, Somerville looked at the personality traits of 60 HR vice presidents it has coached in recent years. Of those, 10 were "top rated" -- chosen by Somerville's consultants on criteria such as their quality and effectiveness of leadership and strategy formation, and on the financial performance of their companies.

According to Jim Thompson, a psychologist and senior consultant there, top-rated HR vice presidents tend to be more like the vice presidents in other functions. They prefer a star system rather than a team environment; they rarely ask for criticism of their ideas -- and they're thick-skinned when they get it; they're also less worried about how business decisions may affect employees and they'd rather see their own visions realized rather than work behind the scenes to help others realize theirs.

Those are all personality traits that allow the top-rated executives to push for their ideas, and stick with tough decisions despite tremendous pressure, says Thompson.

The assessment firms say it's not clear exactly how big a role personality plays in HR leadership. If HR leaders aren't fully effective in pushing their ideas, how much of that is perception -- how HR is viewed by the rest of the C-suite -- how much is career experience and how much is personality? The psychologists inside and outside the assessment firms agree there's no way to be certain.

Marcus, the Philadelphia psychologist and executive coach, says personality often leads people to go into HR in the first place, and then their career paths shape their experience. But, he adds, "personality still dictates what their management and leadership styles will be." Although the data might show HR executives tend to be more feeling than thinking when compared with other leaders, Marcus says he doesn't believe that's a significant factor.

"It's not so much that they're people-oriented," he says. "There are lots of HR vice presidents who are business-minded, analytical and data-driven. It's that they may not be as enterprising or competitive -- they're not creative that way."

Judith Bardwick, a San Diego-based author, lecturer and consultant who specializes in workplace psychology, says she believes the data from the assessment firms is important to consider.

"The implications of this are huge," she says.

HR's personality feeds into the perception that the function itself is not ready to be a full strategic player, says Bardwick. "You can't get to the table unless you are perceived as an equal by the others at the table."

But not everyone agrees personality gets in the way of human resources being effective.

The Center for Creative Leadership, a nonprofit educational and research institution in Greensboro, N.C., was also asked to analyze data on personality tests it has given to HR and other executives. Using data from the Myers-Briggs and other tests, it reached the same findings as the other assessment firms -- including that HR executives are more likely to be feeling than thinking types.

Gina Hernez-Broome, who runs the center's leadership program, and Michael Campbell, a research analyst there, both say they believe HR's personality has not made it less effective.

HR has been held back, they say, but that's because of its traditional tactical and day-to-day operational roles. "It's more of a function of history, and what was expected," Hernez-Broome says.

Some individual HR executives may be limited by their personalities, but that hasn't held back HR leadership as a whole, she says.

Others believe personality plays no role at all.

"I don't think it's a matter of personality type; it's a matter of focus," says Sid Banwart, the corporate vice president for human services at Caterpillar, based in Peoria, Ill. "The HR community has historically been focused on transactional work."

Acting Like the CEO

According to the assessment firms, the personalities of CEOs are much closer to those of executives in the other functions, such as sales and finance, than to the personality of HR. That may not be surprising, considering that CEOs generally come from the other functions.

But Valerie Frederickson, whose Menlo Park, Calif., HR search and consulting firm -- Valerie Frederickson & Co. -- places about 100 human resource executives a year, points out that "the new HR executive needs to have the same personality type as the CEO."

One critical CEO trait, she says: They usually don't worry about being liked.

Because of global competition, says Fredrickson, "HR is going to get a lot more brutal in the next few years. CEOs make tough decisions all day long, and HR people are going to have to do the same thing. They can't worry about being liked."

But can you do that, if it doesn't come naturally? Can you develop the same kind of business temperament as a CEO if that's not really your personality?

For most HR executives, the answer is yes, say the coaches and consultants at the assessment firms.

You can't change your personality, but you can change how you handle specific situations, says Anderson of CPP. "You can mimic those behaviors, even if they're not present in your personality."

Says Peterson of PDI, "We overcome inclinations every day. We get out of bed, we floss. Personality is general, behavior is specific. It's, 'What am I going to do today?'"

The coaches and consultants agree that the first step is self-awareness. You have to know your natural preferences and inclinations, and have a good sense of your comfort

zone.

Part of that self-awareness is in understanding how you might differ from other executives, and how they might perceive you.

Judy Chartrand, the director of talent assessment for Harcourt Assessments of San Antonio, offers this example: It's a personality trait of many HR leaders to want to keep their options open, so they can find a better solution to a problem. If the CEO and executive-committee members are more inclined to make quick decisions, they might see the HR executive as someone who procrastinates -- even if that's not the case.

The next step is to try new, unfamiliar things -- what Michael Campbell, a research analyst for the Center for Creative Leadership, calls "stretching out of your comfort zone." That might mean, for example, being more assertive. But it's crucial, he says, to be aware of how you're perceived.

"You don't want to go out there trying new behaviors without calibrating how other people make their decisions," he says.

Overcoming one's inclinations may not be easy. "It's going to be hard work," says Schmidt of Saville Consulting. "It's like you're not a natural athlete, so it's going to be harder to develop your potential. And it may never come naturally to you."

But, he adds, "Have a plan. Determine what behaviors you need. Practice those behaviors. Get feedback. And keep focused on your objectives. It can be done. I may not be a shark, but I can think like a shark."

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