



“I’VE GOT TWO EARS AND ONE MOUTH, AND I USE THEM IN THAT ORDER.”

Paula Holden FCPHR, Chief People Officer at the Royal Australian College of General Practitioners, on building HR credibility and what leading across radically different industries taught her about people strategy.

AS TOLD TO AMANDA SMITH

I married a mining engineer, which landed me in some pretty remote places early in my career. Flashy marketing and management roles that I studied for didn’t extend out in regional areas, so I ended up working with the exploration drillers.

This involved mapping grids, crushing rocks and taking them to the laboratory. But all along, my manager knew I wanted to be in HR.

A role eventually came up supporting a recruitment campaign to bring on 75 people in three months. When that finished, I took on entry-level HR policy and recruitment work, supporting WorkCover claims and training. This is where I learned the power of making your intentions known and building relationships with frontline teams to establish credibility.

I’ve since oscillated between mining and non-profit, and have seen the profession’s transition from personnel to HR, to people and culture, and to where we are today as strategic and trusted business partners.

The capabilities I’ve developed over my HR career have travelled well, but I’ve also learned that knowing how to read people is only half the equation. The other half is understanding the business itself – and that doesn’t happen by accident.

Throughout my career – across mining, disability services, early childhood education and now healthcare – I’ve proactively pursued conversations with COOs and CFOs to understand their world and identify the gaps I needed to fill.

On leading a mission-driven organisation

The fundamentals – culture, systems, ways of working – carry the same weight wherever you work, but the emotional dynamics are completely different.

In community-focused, purpose-led organisations, every workforce decision is made with a lens of deep mission commitment. In mining, the purpose is financial. Neither is wrong, but if you walk into one assuming it operates like the other, you’ll lose people fast.

As a CPO, you’re often acting commercially with people at the heart. It’s frequently necessary to remind people that, without financial success, it’s hard to drive more purpose.

For-purpose organisations are far more employee-led, so conversations will often have to happen at a grassroots level. For example, educating employees on why it’s okay to spend money on a nice office space, because, ultimately, it helps to attract quality hires and deliver better outcomes. It’s not about being splashy, but making sure we have the right people in the right roles at the right time to deliver on the purpose.

On landing in a new organisation

In the first 90 days in a new organisation, I always strive to listen more than I talk. I’ve got two ears and one mouth, and I use them in that order.

It’s important to recognise how far the business has come before you arrive. I’ve seen leaders walk in and immediately call out everything that could be done. That energy and enthusiasm matters, but you’ve got to honour the past and build on what’s already there – not dismiss it or come in trying to be the hero.

Ask yourself: Do we need to reach the gold-star standard right away, or is bronze okay while we build? Who are the key stakeholders who are deeply ingrained in the business that I need to get to know? Who can help me challenge what needs to be challenged?

When I was working in mining, the laboratory team were known for running their own show, often despite policies and procedures in place. Their leader, who had been there for 20 years, had a “it’s too hard, so we won’t do it” mindset. By spending a few weeks side-by-side with them day-to-day, I built enough trust to slowly introduce new ways of working and get them to see the value in having HR on their side.

The unspoken change champions often don’t always have the most influential formal roles. They’re frequently the long-tenured middle managers who’ve >



You’ve got to honour the past and build on what’s already there – not dismiss it or come in trying to be the hero.

PAULA HOLDEN FCPHR, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER AT THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS





seen multiple leadership agendas and organisational challenges. These stakeholders can be just as important as anyone in the C-suite.

On designing for scale without losing people

I'm most energised being able to create a people-aligned strategy that connects with business strategy – getting to know where the business is at and where it's dreaming of going. Global HR thought leader David Ulrich framed it best: HR should be “doing business from the outside in”.

At RACGP, our strategy is about innovating and leading in primary care. But we can't be what we can't see. If we don't have the space to take risks, or a culture that makes it safe to fail, we can't deliver on that strategy.

A practical example of that is starting with the strategy in mind, then building leadership capability frameworks that allow our people to take measured risks and think differently.

If continuous improvement isn't part of your culture, the innovation won't follow. Start with the end in mind, create safety around a specific component, and by innovating within the workforce, you enable innovation for the customer.

On building trust with boards and executives

Moving into board settings in recent years has changed the way I show up as a CPO. I'm part of conversations well beyond my functional remit, which means I can help shape the people component of strategy with a whole-of-business lens.

Serving as a non-executive director has given me real empathy for where a



board's focus sits. They're not in the weeds of day-to-day operations. They're looking over the next horizon, asking where the organisation is heading through a people lens.

That perspective has reinforced something I feel strongly about: People are the biggest expense, but also the biggest opportunity for service delivery.

When working through a leadership issue with a board some years ago, I secured support because I prepared documentation at the appropriate level, using data, trends, and evidence, without pulling them into unnecessary detail or white noise.

On cutting out noise

HR leaders are constantly navigating the impact of new trends – from the shift to remote work during the pandemic to the current wave of AI. The challenge isn't staying abreast of these trends, but knowing how to filter them: understanding what genuinely applies to your organisation and what doesn't. When we skip that step, we risk losing focus on what matters most within our own context and environment.

Know your strategy and use it as your filter. Stay open to anything new that might genuinely support delivery,

network outside of HR to see where the trends align, don't get sold to by vendors, and pressure-test ideas with your peers and team.

On tough lessons

Earlier in my career I was in a role that just wasn't working, but I couldn't understand if it was me or the person leading me. I shared this with my mentor, who was one of the big chiefs over at Queensland Rail (when they were called Aurizon). As a single mum with big career aspirations, I asked her how to balance parenting, a heavy workload, further study and sitting on a board.

She said something I've never forgotten: You have to find the right environment where that works for you. I'd been in environments where it didn't work for me and I fought harder than I needed to. Sometimes the fight's worth it, but often it's not.

I know it's time to leave when I've genuinely tried to make a difference and things aren't moving in the direction or at the pace I need. At these inflection points, I remind myself that I learn something from every role, even if it's what I don't want to be as a leader. ■



Start your journey to HR Certification with the Talent Management and Trusted Partnership Micro-credential. Scan the QR code to learn more or visit ahri.com.au/certification

THE THREE QUESTIONS THIS CPO ALWAYS ASKS HER TEAM

1 Don't tell me, show me. What is the data telling us? A team I work with proposed shifting a pay cycle from arrears to advance. Employees would initially miss a week's pay, which created some apprehension, but the commercial case was strong. Careful planning and understanding of individual impacts helped us to offer the right support. Once in place, people reflected on how much better it was.

2 What do you want to be when you grow up? This one usually gets a laugh. I tell my team to always think two roles ahead, then ask what I can do for them now that's going to help in two roles' time. The question applies equally in a business context: What do you think we want to be when we grow up? It's about building growth into everything we do, as individuals and as an organisation.

3 Is it 80% there? Don't let perfection be the enemy of good. Sometimes we won't have all the data and we'll need to take a leap of faith. It goes back to building continuous change into the culture. Get it out, test it and adjust along the way. A long-term mindset doesn't mean having everything lined up from the start.

“Moving into board settings in recent years has changed the way I show up as a CPO.

PAULA HOLDEN FCPHR, CHIEF PEOPLE OFFICER AT THE ROYAL AUSTRALIAN COLLEGE OF GENERAL PRACTITIONERS