

Dreaming the Future of HR

*Opening address by President and CEO Johnny C. Taylor, Jr., SHRM-SCP
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Thirteen years ago, I was the Chair of the SHRM Board of Directors and welcomed 12,000 people to San Diego for our Annual Conference and Exposition. Fast forward, and today I have the privilege—and it really is such an honor—to welcome over 20,000 people to Chicago for SHRM18. This is the largest HR event on the planet! Life doesn't get any better than this.

I'd like to thank the SHRM Board of Directors (my governing bosses) and each of our nearly 300,000 members around the globe (my *other* bosses) for entrusting the leadership of this amazing organization to me. I'm truly humbled and will do all I can do to make you proud.

Speaking of my first appearance on the SHRM Big Stage, I remember something else. It was Sunday, June 19, and it was Father's Day! How crazy is that? It's like *deja vu* to be back here on nearly the same day 13 years later.

Before I go any further, I want to send a happy Father's Day to all the dads in the room. Will you stand up and let us recognize you?

Thank you so much for being here. And trust me, I know it's tough to give up your day with your kids. Sometimes, but not every year, the SHRM Annual Conference and Exposition falls on Father's Day weekend. But believe me, that's not on purpose.

You see, we have what some would call a "high class problem." We have grown so tremendously that only a few cities can host a conference our size. We need to get on the city's calendar years in advance, and we don't often have a lot of choice of dates, given that we literally take over a city.

As for me, on Father's Day I would normally be in Ft. Lauderdale with my dad and my daughter. But they graciously agreed to share me with you all. Please join me in thanking my dad and my daughter. Thanks for coming to Chicago on this special weekend. Love you both!

The Right Time for HR

There literally has never been a better moment to be in the business of people. I know many of you remember the time when we were dying to be recognized. We wanted that "seat at the table" and were busy trying to prove our value to business, hoping our colleagues in Finance, Marketing and Technology would see us as their contemporaries. And although there were a few stand-out CEOs, like General Electric's

Jack Welch, who spoke about the virtues of HR, the overwhelming majority of business leaders did not know what we did, or didn't believe it was that valuable to them. They were thinking, "Can't anyone do HR?"

Well those days are long gone. You can't find a CEO who is not talking—a lot—about HR and people. When I speak to organizational leaders these days, in just about every industry, they tell me that they finally get it: people matter. And although they have been saying this for a long time, there's something palpably different. Today this is more than a "feel good" message that every self-respecting CEO ought to say to their employees.

I'm pleased to say we have arrived at a wonderful place in time where CEOs, Executive Directors, government leaders and anyone who calls the shots knows and values good HR. I was talking with a CEO of a global digital agency recently, and in the middle of our meeting, he blurted out, "I always start my morning by talking to my CHRO, because we are in the people business."

That's what he said. Not Marketing, or Advertising, or Creative—but people. I literally smiled from ear-to-ear, and it was all I could do to not shout "Finally!"

I had another CEO tell me there was no problem accessing financial capital to sustain and grow a business these days. The bigger challenge is accessing the right human capital—the capital that is critical to deploying the readily available financial resources.

My SHRM colleagues, it really is about human resources. This is the perfect time to be in HR.

But there's a downside to all this attention. Rarely does a week go by where some media outlet doesn't write a story or broadcast an interview blaming HR for all things wrong in the workplace. From the *New York Times* to 20/20, people are blaming us for everything bad. They always ask: "Where was HR?"

As situations like the #MeToo movement play out, it's often the first question that pops up when reporters call me. And while it stings a little—because we never went away—I actually see this as a positive.

I'm reminded of when I would run home to tell my mother, who is here with me today, that people at school were talking about me. Her response would always be, "Don't worry about them talking about you—worry when they *stop* talking about you."

There was a time in the not-so-distant past when no one was asking about us in HR, because the prevailing thought of the day was that we were a necessary, but not mission-critical, function. Today, people are not asking, "Where was Legal?" or "Where was Risk Management?" They are asking "Where Is HR?" They are turning to us for answers and solutions. It is an endorsement of our relevance and impact.

On a deeper level, organizations finally understand that the people issues that erupt in the workplace—from #MeToo, to pay disparity, to discrimination based on ethnicity, race, age, etc.—are about culture. And culture, inclusion and talent are the very essence of what we do as HR professionals.

And news alert: Congress can't write enough laws to prevent workplace harassment and discrimination. If they could magically solve these issues through legislation, we wouldn't see the headlines of the day. After all, we've had anti-harassment and discrimination laws on the books for half a century.

So, the next time someone asks, "Where Was HR?" the answer, my friends, is unequivocally, "HR is here and this is what we do. Let us get to work."

Finally, I know HR can write our own future because of the auspicious moment we are living in. It's a moment for people, which means it's a moment for HR.

The world is entering what's been called the Fourth Industrial Revolution. But this one is not about the future of machines—it's about the future of human beings' relationship to machines. It's about getting work done through the merger of biological intelligence and artificial intelligence, taking full advantage of technology while unleashing the potential of all that makes us uniquely human.

We are in the middle of a demographic and economic "perfect storm."

- The global economy is hot. America's GDP is tracking toward 4 percent for the second quarter.
- U.S. unemployment claims are the lowest in 45 years. At 3.8 percent, everybody who wants to, and is capable of working, is. We now have more jobs than people to do them.
- At the start of this century, Americans began having fewer children, which means our labor problems are only getting worse. As of last year, U.S. birthrates were continuing to fall, which does not make for a pretty picture, because that means the war for talent will not let up anytime soon.
- Adding to all of this is the reality that for decades, our government has been unable to come up with a smart and sensible immigration policy.

All of this begs the question, who is going to provide the skills our nation needs now and in the future?

This is not just a U.S. issue. Other nations have their people and HR challenges, like skilling up and ensuring they have jobs for booming youth populations. Increasingly, all countries are seeing their destinies tied to demography and—guess what?—people issues.

Speaking of global HR, we are so blessed to have delegations right here in this room from as far as Nigeria, India, Korea and the Caribbean, just to name a few. Your presence here is proof that people issues are a matter of global concern. Each and every one of us is competing for talent on a global scale.

The reality is this: Our organizations need to attract the best people *wherever* they are. They need to skill up their workers *whoever* they are. And they need to be ready for the next industrial revolution *whenever* it shows up.

All of us in this room, and everyone who loves doing HR, are going to elevate this profession. We're going to innovate work in ways no one has thought of yet. We're going to achieve expectations no one has placed on us yet. We're going to dial-up our goals from "stretch" to "audacious."

Chase the Lion

Just a few weeks ago, I was flying to visit our SHRM offices in India and became absorbed in a book by best-selling author Mark Batterson called *Chasing the Lion*. It's based around a single verse in the Bible about a man named Benaiah who chased a lion into a pit, then jumped in after it to slay it.

I don't know about you, but it is not my instinct to chase a lion, and I'm surely not going to go into its pit. But Benaiah ignored every instinct telling him to flee and did the most counter-intuitive thing a human could do. He went after the thing that should have scared him most.

Toward the end of the first chapter, the author made a statement that really stuck with me: *"If your dream doesn't scare you, it's too small."*

I spent the rest of my trip thinking about whether my dream for our profession scared me—or whether it was too small. I thought, *what's our lion?* What is it that this profession, the HR profession, should be dreaming of?

Over the past six months, I have been listening and learning. I've been talking to SHRM members, staff, stakeholders, and business leaders, and I've concluded one thing: Our profession is hungry for transformational ideas and leadership, and it is up to us to compose a vision of the future—a dream that we can achieve.

And we are going to do this in three ways:

First, we must dream about building inclusive workplace cultures. On the horizon, I see a profession that has mastered culture, inclusion and diversity in our workplaces. We will decide *what* our culture is, *who* we hire for it, and *how* we live it.

We will expand our notions of diversity beyond race and gender, and make sure our talent strategies are untethered from bias. We will include in our cultures:

- older workers...
- people with disabilities...
- veterans...
- people with criminal histories...
- and others who have made mistakes and deserve second chances.

We will think seriously about whether letters after a person's name, or a specific degree or work history, is necessary and essential for a particular job.

And we will make our workplaces inclusive to anyone and everyone who can bring the skills we need and live the culture we aspire to.

Second, we must lead workforce readiness. On the horizon, I see a profession that has innovated talent acquisition and skilled up our nation's workforces. We will focus on those people who aren't quite ready, who don't yet have the skills we need, and boost them up.

We will explore educational partnerships, apprenticeships, internships and any number of innovative programs to fill our talent pipelines. We will provide younger people with learning and working experiences, and we will help the long-term unemployed and older returning workers rebuild their careers.

We will not leave to chance the readiness of a workforce our organizations, nations and society need. Again, the stage is set for us tackle this "lion" of a people problem.

Third, we must elevate the profession. If it is the last thing I achieve as your CEO, it will be this. Our profession, the HR profession, is one that should attract the best and brightest. One that improves people's lives exponentially. One that has earned the trust and esteem of everyone we serve.

SHRM is 70 years old this year. And while we can look back and smile, with pride, about how far we have come, we must look forward and make a conscious decision to elevate HR to a higher plane.

We—all of us in this room—will be the ones to transform and lift up our profession. This once-in-a-generation opportunity is ours to lose—or win. Only "us can save us." I know this is bad grammar, but no less true.

- We must care deeply about how we present ourselves in our work and in the world, in our appearance and in our actions.
- We must believe in ourselves so that others will have no choice but to believe in us as well.

- We will fight for laws and policies that may not be popular, but that will set the table for the workplace cultures we want to build, and that will improve our organizations and our people.
- We must be the examples we want to see in our workplaces.
- And, most importantly, we must keep our knowledge and competencies current and relevant to the practice of 21st-century HR, including through certification.

In short, we must set audacious goals for ourselves and our organizations and chase them courageously. And we must be ready to take some major risks.

Does this dream scare you? Good! Because if it doesn't, it's too small.

Now I'm going to scare you a little bit more. We have to jump into this pit and chase after that lion, because our very existence as a profession depends on it.

Why? Because if we don't do this right—chase this lion—business leaders will find someone else to do it.

Hear me: There is no question that the HR function is important. The question is whether leaders believe the HR profession is the right group to manage that function.

It's already happening. There are companies right now where:

- Employee Relations and Labor Relations report to the Legal Department,
- Compensation and Benefits report to the Finance Department,
- Training & Development reports to Operations,
- And even Talent Acquisition and Recruitment report to a Chief Talent Officer, who reports directly to the CEO.

I know. You've come to Chicago to be inspired. But we need more than inspiration. We need *aspiration*.

I want you to take the inspiration you get over the next several days and aspire to do—and be—greater in our workplaces. To really transform what it means to do and be HR.

See, inspiration is what sends us into the lion's pit. *Aspiration* gets us out alive.

We aren't going to leave our dreams here at the door of McCormick Place, or at O'Hare or Midway airport. We need to go back to our offices and live them.

I have a little homework assignment for you as I close. I want each of you to visit the Inspiration Wall and tell us: What dream are you going to chase?

And then as you catch and conquer them, I want you to write to me. I want you to tell me about how you chased your lion.

Did you take a risk that mattered to your employees? Did you dream big in your work? Or did you chase something down, professionally, that scared you?

Well I can tell you now, you won't be alone. Your professional Society, SHRM, will be chasing some lions of our own too. And our chase requires you.

We are on this journey together, and I am so humbled to come along as your CEO. So, let's dream big, and write the future of HR in large letters.

Let's transform the world of HR, together forward!

God bless you all. God bless this profession. Thank you.