

# Rising up to the challenge

By Sanne Rietveld, KennedyFitch



HR has made a major step up in the world of work. In the face of a very tragic pandemic, many HR leaders around the world have risen to the challenge and, in doing so, earned a long-sought-after seat at the table as major decisionmakers. The question now becomes: how can we keep our newfound momentum going—and what should HR leaders focus on as we move forward?

We recently interviewed Julie Jessup, Stephanie Parry and Antoine Tirard, to get their insights on these questions. All three of these professionals have been very active in running peer conversations involving over 20 international HR leaders - from blue-chip companies through to innovative start-ups. These conversations have been instrumental in sharing not just knowledge, but something else that is rapidly becoming central to the future of work: compassion. As Antoine shared with us, there is an opportunity right now for HR professionals to elevate their impact—and we should seize that moment. An edited transcript of our conversation follows.

## Before we dive in, could you please introduce yourselves?

**Stephanie:** I'm an executive coach and organizational development consultant. All my career has been in HR, primarily in organizational leadership development, and I've worked as an HR leader in four major global corporations - like Julie & Antoine, I've had a mix of corporate and consulting experience, with clients in sectors such as finance, technology and retail. Change, both cultural and individual is at the heart of my work, especially aligning values and behaviour.



**Julie:** Similar to Stephanie, I am a leadership coach and advisor. I also had a career inside HR — holding international positions in HR, with an emphasis in leadership development. Today



I work with individuals, teams, and organizations around strategic alignment ensuring all the different levers for change are aligned. In addition, I do a lot of support for social entrepreneurs, which I'm passionate about.

**Antoine:** I'm a talent management advisor, leadership consultant and executive coach. I created NexTalent, a consultancy based in Paris, after 20 years in HR and talent management roles mostly in large global companies. In my corporate roles I've worked in France, Switzerland, the US, and currently serve clients all around the world. In addition, I am dedicated to research and publication around careers—and, particularly, disruptive careers.



Given the changes we are going through, nobody knows the answers - so we are really excited to share lessons learned and keep on doing that for HR leaders.

## So, you recently ran a series of peer conversations with HR leaders. What was the general mood among the leaders that you spoke to?

**Antoine:** When we debriefed our conversations with the 20 or more HR leaders, we found them surprisingly positive and engaged. In spite of the circumstances, they were quite energized and in good spirits, even though some of them have faced some very difficult times. We mainly observed two things:

1. They are tired - but are continuing to rise up to the challenge, and
2. They have a huge eagerness to learn.

Some of them—and maybe the HR members of Madison One feel that way too—said they were exhausted but excited. They really rose to the challenge, stepping in and taking charge, earning a seat at the table. Many of them have been at the heart of the business operations during the crisis, and have been central to managing a lot of issues that arose due to COVID-19.

At the same time, we found them eager and hungry to learn—and very willing to share about their experiences with peers. Even more so, they seem to be willing to share more in-depth knowledge of what they are doing with their peers, sharing their practical actions and experiences. Oftentimes, when HR leaders gather, it is about showing best practices. Instead, these gatherings were really humbling and eye-opening; people were learning from one another and taking HR practices to the next level together as a community of HR leaders.

**Stephanie:** To add to that, they are doing things that HR people never had to do before. One of the HR directors was furloughing 80% of their company's staff; that is something we have never seen before in our careers. That really drives their curiosity and need to learn, and being humble as well.

## To dive a bit deeper, could you share more about the roles these leaders have been playing?

**Antoine:** I would highlight two roles that we've observed:

1. Orchestrators
2. Organizational listeners

First of all, they are highly solicited by their CEOs and executives to respond to the crisis from a Human Capital point of view. Because of the very human impact of the crisis, and how it is affecting all employees, they were sort of a central hub in the

organization—connecting all the dots. They were really proactive and responsive while doing that - and that really intensified the level of interaction with the executive committees. Many of them actively proposed and orchestrated more frequent meetings, checking-in meetings, video conferences for the entire organization and more. They had to balance being fast, responsive and decisive, while at the same time listening to what the organization is feeling and saying and helping all the employees navigate through the crisis - which, in the coming months, will become even more important.

Secondly, they became real organizational listeners. Several of the HR leaders adapted their regular employee engagement surveys into shorter, ad-hoc surveys to understand how employees were feeling with the situation and get feedback. Resulting from that, they were facilitating the communication - they took the lead to organize more frequent communication to the entire organization, and especially the managers. In every organization, employees had their own realities - which managers had to recognize and act upon. The HR leaders we talked to were really helpful in providing those managers more support in communicating and engaging the people on their teams - becoming more compassionate and supportive of their teams and creating a sense of inclusion.

## In addition to these roles, what lessons should HR leaders take going forward as paradigms around work continue to shift?

To succeed in the future, there are several themes that need to be addressed, as we highlighted in our article here, such as a focus on well-being, cultivation of compassionate leadership and mobilizing people.

**Julie:** One of the things that we really noticed is that leaders had to flex their compassion muscle. The crisis was and still is such a big change for everyone - every employee is in a different situation, a different personal challenge. It wasn't just working from home; it was working, living and managing the home situation. There had to be, and will be, a huge need for individual concern for people.

HR leaders can really take the lead in helping the business leaders see what they did and show how successful, both in business and human terms, compassionate leadership was. Communicating success stories around compassionate leadership can change the corporate identity and drive the behaviors and habits of the entire organization. Storytelling, especially, can help to anchor this in the DNA of the organization.

**Stephanie:** To add to that, I would say beyond

compassionate leadership, we need to consider well-being in the workplace differently than we have before. Work/life balance was largely left to employees, and it is certainly clear that now, companies must take on a larger role in establishing best practices - which many have. One HR director we talked to, in fact, called this concept the “sustainability muscle.” It’s a marathon, not a 100-meter sprint we are in, and there are key questions to ask ourselves:

1. How do we manage our own and our organization’s well-being?
2. What systems and processes do we need to support that?
3. How do we interact with, communicate and treat each other?

Leaders have to role model this. If a leader cannot take care of themselves, how can they create an organization that values well-being?

It is vital to avoid grandiose statements. For example a company had a well-being charter. It was there on the wall - but people would be in non-stop zoom meetings, overworking, having little time with their families. The lived experience of the charter was completely different—and here is where HR can hold the leadership team accountable. It is really a time to be thoughtful, not to rush this.

**Antoine:** Many HR leaders have shown through the crisis an amazing ability to drive change fast - they were very responsive, and shifted to solution mode. Our view is that they should capitalize on that, leading and driving the new ways of working in an organization. To add to the suggestions of Julie and Stephanie:

- Try to keep a similar level of frequency and intensity in interaction with the leadership team and CEO
- Keep having a broad perspective about the business; have a point of view. Many companies are revisiting their value chain; this a very important business decision, and HR should be part of those discussions, co-ordinating the conversation
- Continue to show responsiveness and quick decision-making, but also step back a bit more and be thoughtful, looking forward and becoming more strategic as we’re working on these big things such as shaping the culture or working on the values
- Keep listening in

**Antoine:** The listening I’m referring to here should be in mixed contexts, more broadly across the entire organization. In the past, typically a leader would have a town hall meeting or group meeting—it would be quite segmented in terms of geographies or

even categories of employees. With Zoom and other video conferencing devices, more employees from different locations, levels and functions are gathering in similar events or similar polls. That creates a sense of unity. People are sharing more, cutting across the boundaries of the organization. It is a bit early to say, but it really redefines the way we engage and communicate - which leads to more inclusiveness.

**Julie:** As they define this new normal/new way of working, listening to people is key. My guess is that not everybody will go back in the same way, and it is going to have to be a quite flexible system. Everybody went through the crisis differently. Listening, and getting an understanding of what employees want and need and what is important, is critical as they define how to go back—and HR can play an orchestrating role in that.

### **To tap more into the type of leadership you mentioned—empowering and compassionate leadership. What does that really mean?**

**Julie:** It is certainly not new. But we have really seen that creating a culture where empowerment is strong is of strategic importance—more and more so. The pandemic is a factor in making this so important, but there are others. The simple need for speed and the change that everybody went through meant that leaders had no choice but to delegate decisions; there was no other way. Not only was it a need for speed, but every geography was also different. Local legislation was different. The HR managers we spoke to were all saying that there is no way to have a one-size-fits-all or top-down approach. They had no choice but to learn how to empower quickly where they were not already. The companies that were already probably had a lot more bench strengths when they were going through this exercise.

As well, working virtually is almost impossible to micromanage. You don’t see what people are doing. A lot of leaders who typically did micromanage in the past - and we spoke to some who continue to try - have found it challenging. There was no sustainability to this need to micromanage for them, and they started to learn to let go. Empowerment is a feeling; we need to have cultures that make people feel empowered. Going through this crisis, a lot of people got a taste of what that feels like. A lot of people won’t be so ready to give it up as we define the new normal. This is something HR leaders really need to pay attention to. How are they going to leverage that and build on that?

The second thing we need to talk about is digitalization. It gives us an incredible amount of data that we can leverage and use quickly. But if we aren’t empowered to use that data quickly, then we lose the advantage.

One of the examples is the financial industry. They have always said they cannot work at a distance because of compliance, security et cetera. Now they are, and they've learned to - really, digitalization has enabled them to do this and given them incredible power. On the other side, if you are the leader of a financial services business, compliance still matters. As you push decisions down, the risk goes up and the breadth for error increases. Neither one is going away.

Having a culture where doing the right thing is the normal thing is what will help both of them together: autonomy and compliance.

### What can HR leaders do to enable the right leadership behaviors?

**Julie:** As we work with individuals and teams, one of the things we hear the most that creates the most frustration is, "Well, that person got promoted and they are not aligned to our values. So clearly the values don't matter."

HR has an ability to really fight for and show the importance of who they are promoting, and ensure there is alignment. So what they should do instead is align all the HR tools, from hiring to firing, internal communications, performance management, talent development—it all has to have the values in mind. It all has to be aligned. HR leaders know that; it is something they are used to. They know that if the leadership team is making and communicating decisions that are not aligned to the values, it won't go well. "Do as I say and not as I do" isn't successful as a strategy.

### What would you feel are the steps HR leaders to create a strong corporate culture?

**Stephanie:** First of all, what we heard in the calls quite surprised us. There is almost an existential need to rethink work. Before the calls, we were expecting that some of the concerns were going to be more tactical. But in fact, they were very strategic and almost existential. The need to rethink work and how our organization's cultures need to evolve was very prominent. As we start to think about culture, inevitably we are going to get to the values, the foundation of culture. HR can take the lead looking at values and reexamine these through the lens of their learning from the COVID crisis as well as Black Lives Matters and other social movements.

Key questions for themselves and their executive

teams are :

- Given everything we have learned, which of our values have helped us? Which ones have been obstacles to our facing the crisis? What might we need to reconsider and add in? How do our values relate to inclusion, diversity and belonging?
- How do the values they relate to creating a culture of well-being?

Whilst doing that, we have to really work to surface our own unconscious biases and the biases of the system we are part of. We're at a real moment in time where we have to make our own biases more conscious. How can wider societal systems change if organizations don't bring that change too? A lot is at stake looking at organizational culture.

Key to all of that is looking at the behavior of senior leaders. Is it congruent with their own values and those of the organization? Are they behaving authentically, or are the values for show? This is a moment where we need to rethink all of our experiences - and it has to be more than a performance.

### What happens if companies don't revisit these values?

**Stephanie:** Personally, I think there would be a widening gap between what is happening in our world in our societies, and what happens in the company. That gap would start to affect relationships with employees around engagement and empowerment and key stakeholders. There are some companies that are behaving badly; as we emerge from this crisis, they will be held accountable by their customers, employees and other stakeholders. Others are behaving well and consistently with their values; those companies will benefit. There is a choice to be made and there is a risk attached to not being conscious about our values right now. It may be that a company revisits them and says they are happy with the values - but let's at least look at how we live those values.

**Julie:** Totally agree. For me, there would be a sense of growing frustration within a company and they would not be able to leverage what they learned. It would feel like going backward for some people.

### Lastly, what are you reading/listening and watching right now that you feel inspiring?

**Stephanie:** One podcast that I find very interesting is in the spirit of Black Lives Matter. It is called [1619](#), about the origin of slavery in the US—but also looking at its connection with other countries. It is very

tempting to say it is a US issue, but this podcast shows how everything is interconnected, and how decisions made centuries ago really impact how we run our businesses today. If you are interested in looking at your unconscious biases this is interesting.

The other thing I would recommend is a book called [It doesn't have to be crazy at work](#). It was written a couple of years ago by some guys running a software company. They were working crazy hours, no vacations, and then they upended the paradigm of work, saying, "Hang on a minute—this is not sustainable way of working." It is full of practical help on how to be less crazy at work. A good book for HR, given the intensity of their experience, but also to hand to other people in the organization.

**Julie:** What came to my mind is a TED Talk I watched by a woman named Kate Raworth, called, "[A healthy economy should be designed to thrive, not grow](#)" It is on a different theme—but it upends my definition of what the economy is. Is the economy sustainable? She talks about a lot of topics we talked about today: empowerment, alignment of systems and values. There is no system in nature that continues to grow forever - so why should we?

**Stephanie:** That circles back to the 1619 podcast, actually, because there is a whole episode on the economy, the economic model that was driven by the cotton industry - and the same questions are asked.

The final one I would add is something I saw the other night which is a piece of video by Carl Sagan, called [Pale Blue Dot](#) - which is the planet earth. If we look at the planet earth from a different perspective, we are just a pale blue dot. It is a really inspiring video, and it puts everything that we are experiencing into a much larger perspective.

When things seem so important from an individual basis, I find it quite helpful to think, "I am on that pale blue dot."

**Thank you so much Julie, Stephanie and Antoine!**