

Why HR Needs to Play a Bigger Role In 'Agitating' For Change

HR Executive | Jen Colletta | November 26, 2024

Change is coming fast to businesses across industries—from rapid advancements in artificial intelligence to shifting ways of working and a new administration taking the helm of the federal government in January. Leveraging change management to help organizations and their employees not only weather that change but get in front of it will increasingly become a cornerstone of HR's mandate, says Monique Herena, chief colleague experience officer of American Express.

The recently named Fellow of the National Academy of Human Resources is looking to her record of leading large-scale change and transformation for guidance in confronting the coming challenges.

Among the lessons rising to the forefront is that HR needs to be a vocal change leader.

"I talk a lot about agitating," she says. "It doesn't matter how long you've been with the company, how long the company's been around. Even if things are going well, you know there are things you can do better so you have to be that voice in the room that says, 'Of course we can do this, it's just a matter of how.' "

Change management at scale

Herena's change-management efforts have been particularly impressive and even more rewarding, she says, because of the nature of the organizations at which she led them. American Express, which she joined in 2019, is about to celebrate its 175th anniversary; previously, she led HR at BNY Mellon, which traces its history to the nation's first bank, founded in 1869. She also held HR leadership roles at other companies with rich histories, including PepsiCo, Honeywell and the Quaker Oats Co.

In such settings, it's key that HR keep the rearview mirror in focus as they drive change.

"You really want to respect the past and have the right context and history of the business you're in—without getting caught up in the past," she says. "You have to build on the best of the best but know where you sit today relative to other companies and push where you can be better, where you can innovate, where you can be more competitive."

Herena's efforts to do so have taken her around the world—including leading major expansions for PepsiCo in Asia, the Middle East and Africa—and allowed her to lead the people aspects of business model shifts, new org designs, changing investment strategies and more.

Key to the success of such initiatives, she says, has been ensuring leadership and the entire workforce come along together on the change journey.

“You have to lay out the right vision so people can see where you’re headed and get excited for it,” she says.

The link between trust and business performance

When HR-led change efforts go awry, Herena notes, it’s often because HR failed to step into the shoes of their stakeholders.

“To lead change, you can’t be afraid to start by going to where people are,” she says, advising fellow HR executives to consider “where people’s feet are, not just where yours are.”

It can be easy to judge if someone isn’t as quick to jump on board for change, but HR should consider the root of that hesitation, including that HR may have designed the change journey from a lens not shared by all leaders or employees.

“Maybe we haven’t done a great job of explaining why this change is critical for the business, what role they will play, how they can contribute,” she says. “You can’t be mechanical around change leadership; you have to be vulnerable, think about not just the head but the heart too.”

That’s part of why American Express has prioritized its relationship-oriented culture, Herena says. Managers and leaders are encouraged to genuinely understand their employees—what makes them tick, their hobbies, their families, what they think is working at the organization and what’s not.

Herena attributes the company’s recent growth and successes—it boosted revenue 40% to more than \$67 billion between 2021-23, for instance—largely to the sense of trust within American Express.

“The reason we have the results we have is because we have built a lot of trust,” she says. “People will want to keep growing, learning and executing on your vision and goals if you build that strong connection, that trust—and it’s genuine.”

Data is key to sustaining that work.

Herena says American Express’ omnichannel employee listening strategies—surveys, focus groups, Slack channels—help HR comb through “fantastic, rich data” about colleagues’ real experience so they can respond effectively. It’s another way to help develop connection and trust, she says.

Those will be key as HR approaches 2025, a year in which changes like the advancement of artificial intelligence are primed to transform the employee experience.

Today, American Express has hundreds of use cases for generative AI in play across the organization. These are run through a gen AI council before being integrated into functions, including in HR. For instance, bots are helping employees find HR information more seamlessly, while real-time coaching has become a “powerful” tool, she says.

As such capabilities expand next year, HR will need to lean into change management to capitalize on the potential.

“When you think about 2025, the environment overall is going to be really interesting,” Herena says. “Most importantly, we need to stay agile for change.”