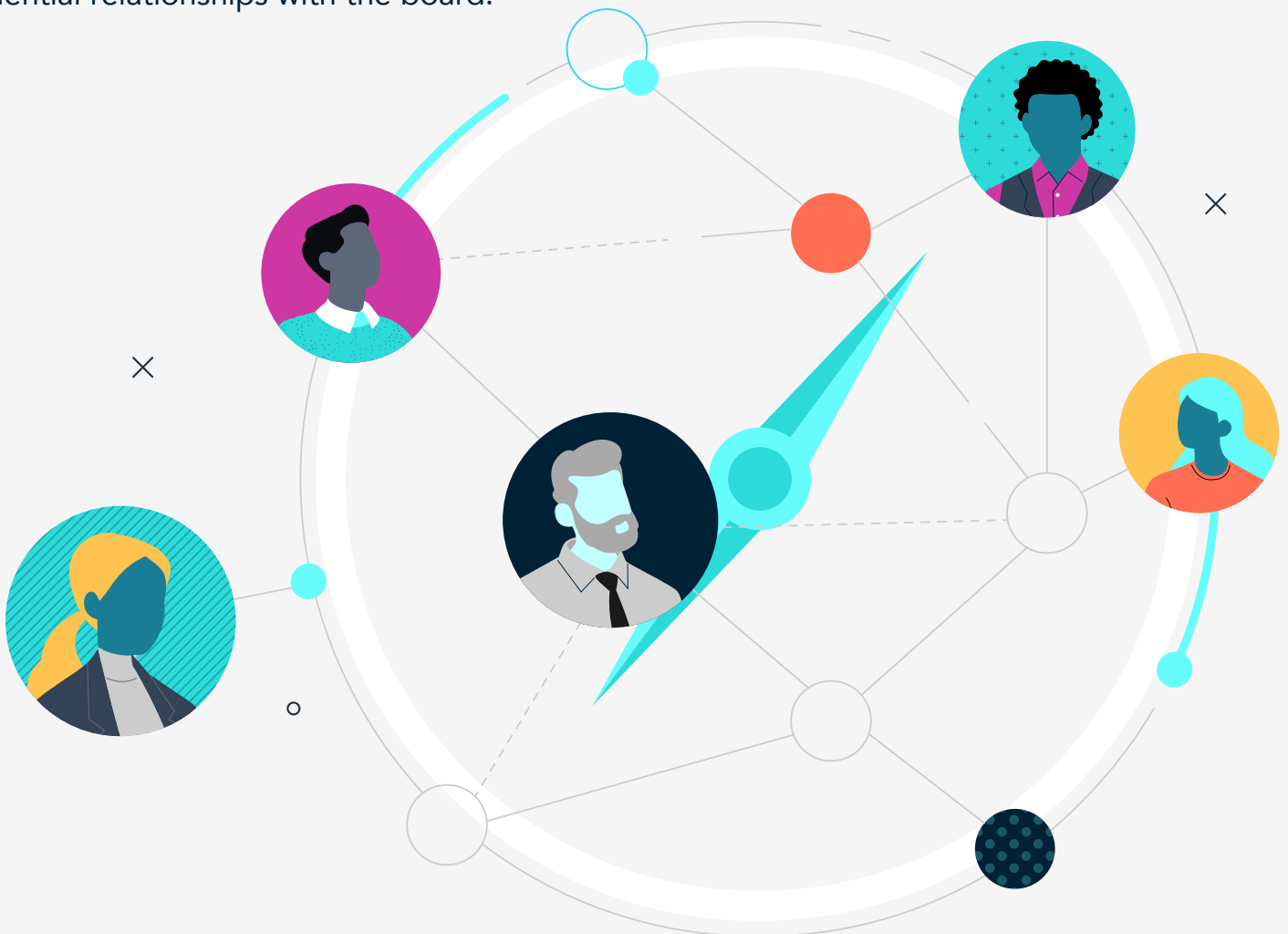


ARTICLE

Chief people officer focus: How leadership planning can be a foundation of stronger relationships between CPOs and boards

CEOs and directors lack confidence in their executive attraction, retention, and development strategies. CPOs who play a crucial role in improving these efforts can also build more strategically focused and influential relationships with the board.



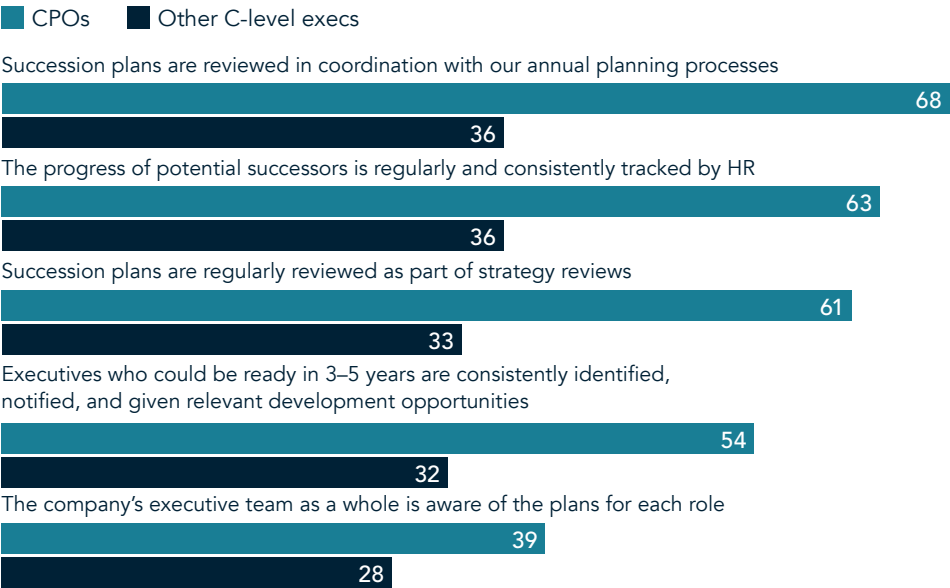
Corporate leadership talent is a pressing strategic need today and a top priority for board members because they see it as increasingly influential on valuation. Many boards and leadership teams are treating executive leadership as a material risk. Yet only half of CEOs and directors are confident their company’s executive attraction, retention, and development strategy is positioning the organization well for the long term.

Chief people officers are crucial to improving an organization’s efforts, both in their executive role and when they serve as board members. Some CPOs are combining a deep knowledge of their company’s business with strategic foresight and increased influence in the C-suite to build the board’s confidence in leadership for today and tomorrow. In this article, based on discussions with some 75 leading CPOs and a recent survey, we look at what those successful CPOs are doing and share their perspectives on why so many are further away from that goal. In addition, we suggest how others can build the foundation for more wide-ranging and influential relationships with the board by starting with a strategic focus on the leadership pipeline. More effective board relationships will also help CPOs address the other pressing issues for which companies are increasingly turning to them.^{1,2}

CPOs who are treating the leadership pipeline strategically

CPOs often say their company’s work on executive succession planning is aligned with annual and strategic planning, and that they communicate with and track progress of identified successors. Nonetheless, data from two recent surveys show executives outside HR far more rarely think any of these things are happening.

**Actions companies are taking on succession planning:
Views of CPOs and other C-suite leaders (Top 5) (%)**



Source: summer 2025 CPO survey (n=600) and summer 2025 executive survey (n=516)

Whether the source of these different views is a lack of visibility (since much of this work is necessarily done behind the scenes), a lack of communication between HR leaders and leaders in other functions, or a sense among other leaders that HR’s work on this isn’t valuable, **the fact that leadership quality is an increasing material risk for organizations, one on which boards are focused, means that leaders need to start pulling together.**

1 We have explored elsewhere how adding CPOs to boards makes boards more effective. See Dorothy Badie, Laryssa Topolnitsky, PhD, “Board effectiveness focus: Why directors with HR expertise help boards do better,” Heidrick & Struggles, October 24, 2023, [heidrick.com](#)

2 For more on the evolving role of CPOs, see Emma Burrows, Sandra Pinnavaia, Sharon Sands, Brad Warga, Jennifer Wilson, Darren Ashby, “Chief people officer of 2030: Building a tool kit to get from here to there,” Heidrick & Struggles, February 20, 2025, [heidrick.com](#)

Some CPOs have taken that need as an opportunity. Typically, these CPOs have started by having a particularly trusting relationship with the CEO, which often starts with CEO onboarding (see sidebar on the ideal CPO role in onboarding). CPOs who can discuss their deep knowledge of leadership team dynamics, skills, gaps, and risks in the context of a detailed understanding of the company's strategy and operations can build credibility quickly. When that happens, one CPO told us, "The CEO wants you in the room all the time, they're talking behind closed doors about the value your function is adding—and then the board reaches out to you too."

Of course, being able to have those conversations with the CEO also requires CPOs to stretch themselves beyond traditional HR expertise; in addition to knowledge of how their business works, they need to develop technological fluency, first-principle thinking, strong peer-to-peer relationships, and the courage to step outside the traditional HR lane. These capabilities are crucial for effective HR leaders.³

It's also crucial that CPOs find the right approach to broadening their relationship with the board, which will vary from board to board. In general, however, CPOs can most effectively highlight their value by offering substantive knowledge at the right time, without waiting to be asked but also without offering extraneous information. We'll discuss how to do that in detail below.

CPOs and CEO onboarding

Particularly at larger public companies, onboarding is crucial to the CPO-CEO relationship, whether the new CEO is internal or external. The CPO may act as the point person and primary coordinator, working alongside the general counsel and in close connection with the chairperson or responsible board member. The CPO may be responsible for putting together a leadership playbook with structured 30-60-90-100 day plans and formal feedback loops at six and twelve months; helping prioritize conversations; navigating red tape and administrative processes; and ensuring key stakeholders are communicating.

The CPO is uniquely placed to help an incoming CEO become more effective more quickly because of their knowledge of leaders across the company. CPOs can help CEOs understand the dynamics of the leadership team and how those might shift with a new leader; offer perspectives on the board; provide insights into the workforce implications

of new strategic ideas or regulatory requirements; and advise on how pockets of organizational strength and weakness may affect the organization's ability to reach new goals. Especially in the case of an outside hire, CPOs can provide context on individuals' performance throughout the organization (particularly overlooked or underperforming executives whose status may not have been discussed during the interview process), the culture, and organizational sacred cows. CPOs can brief internal hires on past conversations they might not have been privy to, topics that can include team dynamics, or the specifics of individual executives' compensation or retention packages. In all of these conversations, it's important for the CPO to strike the right tone: they want to be a partner and confidant for the incoming CEO by providing useful information that will help them get their bearings; they do not want to come across as a gossip.

When the new CEO is a first-time

CEO who is not used to working with the board, an experienced CPO can help ground them in what the board has expected from the executive team in the past and where the executive team could more effectively leverage the board.

CPOs should, however, be careful not to overwhelm or unduly influence the incoming CEO with their thoughts and opinions. They should take time to build trust organically, intentionally getting to know the CEO through regular meetings and by making themselves available rather than assuming they will be a key confidante from the beginning. By trying to understand where the CEO is coming from—including learning about the dynamics of their previous team—and respecting the CEO's ability to form their own opinions, they can lay the foundation for a trust-based and productive partnership from the beginning. A strong partnership with the CEO supports a strong partnership with the board.

³ Brad Warga, Jennifer Wilson, "Chief people officer monitor: Building HR functions that are effective and strategically influential", Heidrick & Struggles, September 24, 2025, heidrick.com

Room for growth in the CPO and board relationship today

Overall, CEOs and directors feel positively about CPOs’ contributions to their company’s ability to meet its strategic goals, with 86% saying CPOs are at least somewhat influential. And CPOs feel positively too: 91% say they have the same or more influence compared with their peers at the same level.

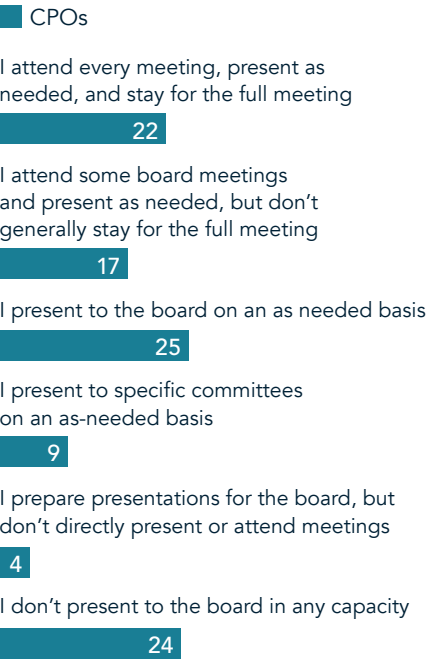
When it comes to executive succession planning, however, only 29% of executives say the board is informed of succession plans for critical roles, and only 25% say the board regularly reviews those plans. Fifty-five percent of CPOs indicate their company has succession plans for the wrong executive roles.

At least some of the reason for this disconnect is likely how CPOs are spending their time with the board, a point underscored both by the data and by our conversations with CPOs. Some CPOs, for example, perceive their boards to be putting more focus on the HR budget than on people results, or setting conflicting expectations, including overfocus on traditional HR activities relative to strategic issues. For example, CPOs may be brought in to help with a succession plan, but when they haven’t been included in any of the strategic discussions leading up to that point, it can leave them feeling ill-prepared for the job at hand.

CPOs have more direct relationships with the board members, they feel more prepared to answer questions. That’s hardly surprising, but it’s troubling that 24% of CPOs say they don’t present to the board in any capacity—not even preparing presentations they don’t present themselves—and only 23% of CPOs say they have a direct relationship with the entire board. CEOs and directors report significantly higher levels of connection.

CPOs’ role during board meetings (%)

Which strategic goals does leading across boundaries most help with?



Source: summer 2025 CPO survey (n=600)

How do CEOs and directors think CPOs interact with the board?



Source: Q1 2025 CEO and Board survey (n=1,027)

Do you have a direct relationship with members of the board? (%)

■ CPOs ■ CEOs/Directors

The entire board



The non-executive chair



A member of a specific committee or committee chair



One or two board members



No one



Source: summer 2025 CPO survey (n=600) and Q1 2025 CEO and Board survey (n=1,027)

All of this boils down to the fact that CEOs and directors think the board has a deeper and more informed relationship with CPOs than CPOs themselves do—and many CPOs are less able to offer the best advice, or know when to offer that advice, than they would like to be. It's no wonder that 96% of CPOs want ore time with the board, either as a whole or with board committees.

Deepening the CPO and board relationship

The answer to this misalignment isn't just adding more time for CPOs to engage with board members. The question is time with whom, and on what topics? From our work and ongoing discussions with CPOs and board members, we've identified four key areas where greater time investment from CPOs can most effectively support the board's agenda and enhance the relationship.

Navigating the natural path to the boardroom table

CPOs need to be confident that what they bring to the boardroom table is unique, insights that can't be replicated or represented by other executive team members. CPOs' top-down understanding of people and culture contributes to a holistic perspective on issues affecting the workforce at all levels that is vital to informing board decisions about talent, which is, as we have noted, a topic increasingly important to boards since they see it as increasingly important to valuation.

With that confidence, a natural path for CPOs to highlight for the board their deep understanding of the organization is through the compensation and nominating & governance committees. A key part of succession planning is the readiness of internal candidates, so CPOs can use discussions with these committees to get to know the board and their interests better. Being able to offer current information on compensation trends for existing and emerging roles is often an important way for CPOs to ensure they're giving board members information they need. This means being able to anticipate business needs. For example, when companies rushed to hire executives with AI expertise, CPOs who understood how tech firms were compensating people in those roles early on could give their organizations an edge. Similarly, being able to offer committee members insights on leadership skills,

capabilities, and availability gathered from peers in the company's sector and outside can highlight CPOs' broader business acumen and foresight.

CPOs note that part of navigating this path successfully is striking a balance between having a strong, aligned relationship with the CEO and being a "truth teller" to the board. This may sometimes be uncomfortable, but CPOs who identify problems that can influence strategy implementation early on—such as a faltering culture or unaddressed skills gaps—and start open, honest conversations about them can help find solutions that benefit the entire company.

Executive succession planning

We have written extensively elsewhere about how to improve executive attraction, retention, development, and succession planning processes.⁴ Key tactics for improvement include greater alignment with business strategy and integrating these activities enterprise-wide rather than allowing them to remain siloed.

To get board buy-in and support for these efforts, CPOs need to start with the CEO. CPOs can also work to find time with the board or individual board members to bring them relevant insights on human capital issues in the business and best practices beyond the kinds of immediate challenges we described above. For example, CPOs can share data to demonstrate that they're proactive and thoughtful about succession planning in the context of specific business needs. If the CPO gets an opportunity to present to the board, this is an opportunity to talk about the executive pipeline, what they're seeing, and what they plan to do to ensure the business will have the leaders it needs.

CEO succession planning and transition

In addition to CPOs' significant role in CEO onboarding, they are also often more involved in CEO succession planning today than they have been traditionally. Having the skills and relationships to strategically engage with CEO succession can help CPOs strengthen their relationship with the board and may even be a factor in CPOs getting hired.

As the CEO leadership transition process accelerates, CPOs can serve as neutral moderators between the outgoing CEO and the board, helping both sides navigate the change while keeping the focus on leadership readiness. Supporting the personal and organizational aspects of transition while safeguarding governance boundaries is often complex; CPOs, with their deep knowledge of leadership and culture, provide critical guidance. When the situation is a founder transition, dual-class shareholding structures, or another particularly complicated context, CPOs' input can be even more helpful to the board.

Strategy implementation—on the right foundation

As we have noted, CPOs also have a significant, and increasing, role to play in implementing strategy—everything from workforce planning, such as location and talent liquidity, to AI implementation to fostering resilience and agility. But to have a productive influence in these areas, CPOs first need to get the basics right, executing well on their core responsibilities and ensuring the organization is running smoothly. If they can show the board that they're effective leaders in these areas, it can open the door to engaging more strategically—and, CPOs stress, if they falter in the traditional HR responsibilities, the board won't take them seriously on other topics. More broadly, given that they have

4 Sarah Arnot, Sharon Sands, Todd Taylor, "Leadership assurance: How data can improve every aspect of executive leadership development and succession planning," Heidrick & Struggles, July 31, 2024, heidrick.com; Camilla Gilone, Fabrice Lebecq, "Supply-chain officer focus: The strategic value of succession planning," Heidrick & Struggles, September 11, 2025, heidrick.com; Sandra Pinnavaia, Todd Taylor, "Leadership assurance: The role of interim leaders in supporting companies through change and disruption," Heidrick & Struggles, July 16, 2025, heidrick.com.

a pulse on the leadership team, they can help both other executives and the board think about the implications of change. In the case of acquisitions, CPOs can play a vocal role in setting the strategy and integrating new team members, as well as tying the effort back to commercial indices.

An increasing number of CPOs are taking an active role in their organizations' strategic planning and execution; building a strong relationship with the board is essential to making that possible. There's no model for doing so, and no single right way—each board is different. But starting with a good relationship with the CEO, having the confidence to navigate the path to the boardroom, and engaging on priority topics for boards—executive succession planning, how it relates to strategy implementation, and ensuring smooth CEO transitions—will help CPOs strengthen their board relationships and thereby their impact and influence. This will help CPOs ensure not only that their organizations will have the leaders they need for the long term but also that CPOs can support their companies on the range of other pressing issues they face.

About the authors

Jeff Sanders

is a vice chair and co-managing partner of the global CEO & Board of Directors Practice; he is based in the New York office.

jsanders@heidrick.com

Laryssa Topolnytsky, Ph.D

is a partner and leader in the CEO & Board of Directors Practice; she is based in the Toronto office.

ltopolnytsky@heidrick.com

Jennifer Wilson

is the global co-head of the Human Resources Officers Practice; she is based in the Dallas office.

jwilson@heidrick.com

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Leaders of Heidrick & Struggles' Human Resources Officers Practice

Global

Brad Warga
San Francisco
bwarga@heidrick.com

Jennifer Wilson
Dallas
jwilson@heidrick.com