



LEADING HR IN HYPERGROWTH

What does it take to shape the people agenda of an organization in hypergrowth mode? What kind of CHRO is more likely to be successful in an environment that can often be in a state of ‘controlled chaos’?

For the last few years, as central banks have opened the taps of cheap money, the world has been awash with liquidity. A flood of capital is chasing good business ideas and there is a wave of hypergrowth companies rushing to become unicorns.

Hypergrowth companies can be start-ups or scale-ups but, in both cases, speed is a defining factor.

For hypergrowth CEOs who have a clear business vision and easy access to capital, the biggest bottleneck is often people. This is where a strong Chief Human Resources Officer (CHRO) can make a significant difference in the development of the company.

Our team at Kingsley Gate Partners interviewed eight CHROs of some of the most successful hypergrowth companies in Asia to share their experience and lessons learned. The picture they painted was highly consistent.



Hypergrowth companies, often technology or e-commerce related, offer challenges that can differ starkly from established companies. As Sonam Jain, who became EVP HR of Zilingo after a successful corporate HR career across Asia and Europe, put it “I wanted to get out of my comfort zone, and I knew I could not predict what would happen... besides a very steep learning curve”. While this is true, our research showed that there are some ‘known unknowns’ that one should prepare for:

- **Expect change to be the only constant.** Every CHRO we interviewed highlighted the high pace of change in hypergrowth companies. According to Cary Shek, CHRO of Klook, “you operate under constant uncertainty. Everything changes every three months, so you need to be agile. HR is like the backbone to the company; it needs to support and be flexible to allow movement”. As a leader, the CHRO needs to role model and thrive in this environment. “Be prepared to be struck down repeatedly as things change so rapidly. The strategy can be adjusted constantly. It is not for the faint-hearted”, shared Srikanth Chandrashekhar, founder of Scribe Zero and until recently the HR Leader of an AI start-up. You need great planning and execution but at-speed. As Anand Wong, Head of People at Chope, simply put it “no matter how well you plan, things will change”. If you are not cut out for that, you will be frustrated and you will frustrate others around you.
- **You need a strong foundation to build for the future.** While strategy is constantly in motion, CHROs need to

balance speed with getting the basics right. It is like building a plane while you are flying it. According to Genevieve Godwin, CHRO at PropertyGuru, “you need to make sure that the foundations are done well, and you cover all the bases. You can then focus on developing the strategy and the business. Otherwise, you are always chasing your tail”. She added that it is important to keep a perspective of where the business came from, and where it needs to go as “whatever you do today must continue to meet your needs of the future”. As Shek agreed, “many things are very operational, like HRIS. But if you are getting payroll wrong, don’t talk about leadership development!”

- **Culture is the glue that makes everything work.** “Candidates often ask me about the culture of our company – I tell them that culture cannot be defined by HR alone. It is defined by how an organization lives and breathes and should be articulated by every business leader, not just HR,” said Poddar, CHRO of LivSpace. It is important for hypergrowth companies to bring people together through shared values and behaviours. Sophie Xue, CHRO of Lazada, agreed that building a sense of community and shared purpose is essential in our fragmented world. She observed that “nowadays we are living on our mobile phones and can work from anywhere. We want to build a common purpose and a circle of friends, not just colleagues”. Chin Yin Ong, Grab’s Chief People Officer also emphasized that in Grab “we constantly look at our culture. We evolve it every couple of years. It is not just an employee engagement survey; it is about signalling what behaviours we want to emphasize and which ones we will not accept. Our founders are very involved and concerned about it”.
- **It is a war for talent... on steroids.** While the war for talent has accelerated post-pandemic, hypergrowth companies face a great challenge, both in attraction and retention. Xue told us that “Our talent quality is very high, so our people are in high demand. When you are a leading player you face a fierce talent war on hiring and retention, but you cannot compromise on talent quality”. Jain explained that “A lot hypergrowth companies throw money to attract people but you are not getting people for the right reasons. Instead, we try to screen people for motivation and target those who want to learn and get exposure to much more than their core job”. In LivSpace, according to Poddar, “we give candidates live business cases to see how well they can relate to our problem statements. We might sometimes hold 3-4 rounds of interviews before hiring. While it is an extensive process, it helps ensure we get the right people that align with our value proposition. On the other hand, our path to recognizing



and grooming talent is fast. It is not defined by time in the role, but by potential and demonstrated success”.

→ **Capability-building of front-line managers is key.** It is often mentioned that employees don't quit companies, they quit their boss. Hypergrowth companies, with young, talented staff led by relatively green managers, face that issue constantly. As Wong put it, “you want to inspire the new generation. They are generally

younger talents, and they respond to very different things”. Jain emphasized that “The more you can train your middle managers on good leadership practices, the more stickiness you create in your organisation”. Godwin agreed that “we need to ensure middle management have the right capability. They often come in at the start-up phase, so we need to help develop them”.



While HR leaders in corporate environments might feel working in a hypergrowth company would be exciting, they need to realize it requires a different type of mindset.

→ **You need to roll up your sleeves... all the way up.** As mentioned earlier, it is important for hypergrowth CHROs to get the basics covered, and probably get a lot of it done themselves. As Poddar put it, “Being a jack of all trades is not always a disadvantage and could, in fact, be a strength. In our environment, everyone would roll up their sleeves. We place great value on deep expertise, but it is important to be able to cut across multiple roles. Most people think they can do it but developing cross functional agility can be challenging.” Chandrashekhar, too, agreed. He sees leading HR in start-ups as a “tough contact sport. It is so tough that it makes you tougher for life”.

→ **It is not about looking good.** Most CHROs we interviewed confirmed that, in hypergrowth companies, only results matter. Shek explained that “it

is not about making your boss happy, not about hierarchy”. Poddar added that “people here don't care about titles – it is about the experience and the exposure. They are hungry for experience and being able to make an impact. This is what we hire for and retain against. There is no one to impress, the outcomes are quite evident in the success metrics”. Similarly, Godwin felt that hypergrowth companies are “less political environments, more open, more people focused”.

→ **It is not about being a business partner, it is about being a business leader (who happens to know HR).** All hypergrowth CHROs concurred that they need to think and act like a business leader to make a true difference. Chandrashekhar explained that in a hypergrowth company “you need to understand everything about the business, the product stack, the go-to-market strategy, etc. As a HR leader, you need to learn it, and sometimes even lead it. You need to rethink your persona as a businessperson, as an owner”. Ong confirmed that “HR leaders who have a CEO mindset do best. The CHRO needs to embrace what the CEO wants to do and take this agenda as their own”. Similarly, Jain feels that “If you don't understand the business and the financials deeply, you simply cannot do your job. As CHRO in a hypergrowth company, you are a business leader tasked with growing the company. Your HR expertise is just one of the many skills you bring to the business”.

→ **To add value, get out of people's way.** The best way for HR to bring added value to the business is by keeping things simple and personal. As Wong summarized it, “you need to approach policies and processes by looking at how people would react and respond”. Shek, who spent the bulk of her career in fast-growing companies, went even further by remarking “I may be biased, but I feel policies and processes do not work in hypergrowth environments”. Poddar also highlighted that “if things are too complex in your head, nobody will get it. Your HR ideas should be simple, authentic, and easily understood”.



HR LEADERSHIP IN HYPERGROWTH REQUIRES SPECIAL ATTRIBUTES

So, what kind of HR leadership is required to be successful in hypergrowth? Firstly, let's dispel the myth that only young people can fit in. "I don't think it is about age – it is about the chemistry you have with your CEO and the leadership team," said Wong. Beyond that, a few leadership abilities will make a lot of difference.

- **Be a data-driven problem solver.** Most hypergrowth companies are a technology play. Data and fact-based analysis are in their corporate DNA, and HR needs to follow suit. As Godwin explained, "every time we adopt a new HR technology, it is important that it has an analytics capability, and it is foundational to all that we do. That allows us to be preventive rather than reactive". Poddar concurred that "you need to figure out quickly what is working or not, and why. The why is most important". To achieve that, a problem-solving

mindset is key. As Xue remarked, "I have observed several great HR leaders in our company. They are great adaptive problem solvers. Their common trait is open-mindedness. They seek different opinions from the ground up and listen well. A lot of the challenges we face are new, so we need strong problem solving and adaptability".

- **Relish failure, it is a given.** Many CHROs highlighted that hypergrowth companies are environments where you are expected to take risk, and sometimes fail. Chandrashekhar explained that "failures are guaranteed, so let's just learn from it and move on". "You are constantly doing moon shots, so you must be comfortable with failure. Not everything is always going to go as planned. You need to be open to learning from mistakes" agreed Godwin. Ong shared a similar experience "Don't be afraid to fail and learn from it. I can't tell you how many times I failed in my role. Be a fast learner and try all over again". Shek summed it up by saying that "we want to empower people to be bold. Therefore, we understand mistakes can happen and we don't mind. Just take calculated risks. Fail cheap and move fast".
- **Dare to hire people who are smarter than you.** No one person can have all the solutions. Great hypergrowth CHROs know how to surround themselves with other great HR leaders. "The challenge will be more than you imagine, but you need to be optimistic. You need to always believe that the solution will come. Build a strong team, hire people who are even stronger than you. Be a talent scout. The magic will happen when you have a great team" said Xue. Ong agreed "always build a team who is better than yourself. Every team member should be better than you in their area. I feel my job is to get the team so ready that I can leave any time. Lack of secure leadership is one of the biggest problems".
- **Pace yourself.** Several CHROs we interviewed compared working in a hypergrowth environment as a relentless treadmill. "You are running a marathon, and sprints at the same time. You are constantly going to be at that pace, and it never stops. Initially it can be exhilarating, but you need to pace yourself, to not burn out in the long run" mentioned Jain. Godwin agrees "you must pace yourself, since you must run all the time. There is never a low week for me, you are always working at speed. A lot of people in larger organizations do not truly understand the difference".



From speaking to these eight hypergrowth CHROs it became clear that, until you have been in a hypergrowth company, you cannot truly know what it is like. "I sometimes think I was mad to go to a start-up – in hindsight I am quite proud to have taken that risk, because I learned so much from it. But you just need to realize that you may work a lot more AND be paid a lot less. So, you really need to know why you are doing this" said Chandrashekhar. Ong also highlighted the need for a 'why': "Really ask yourself why you would do this. This is the only thing that will keep you sprinting during that marathon. It is about whether your mind can keep your body moving. At the end of the day, you need the strength of the 'why' to push you forward".

Despite all these challenges, many CHROs feel there is no way back for them to a large corporate environment. HR in hypergrowth is fast and challenging... and addictive. One CHRO we interviewed has since left to start his own HRTech company, and another has shared similar ambitions.

From hypergrowth CHRO to CEO? Will that be the next evolution? Stay tuned.

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