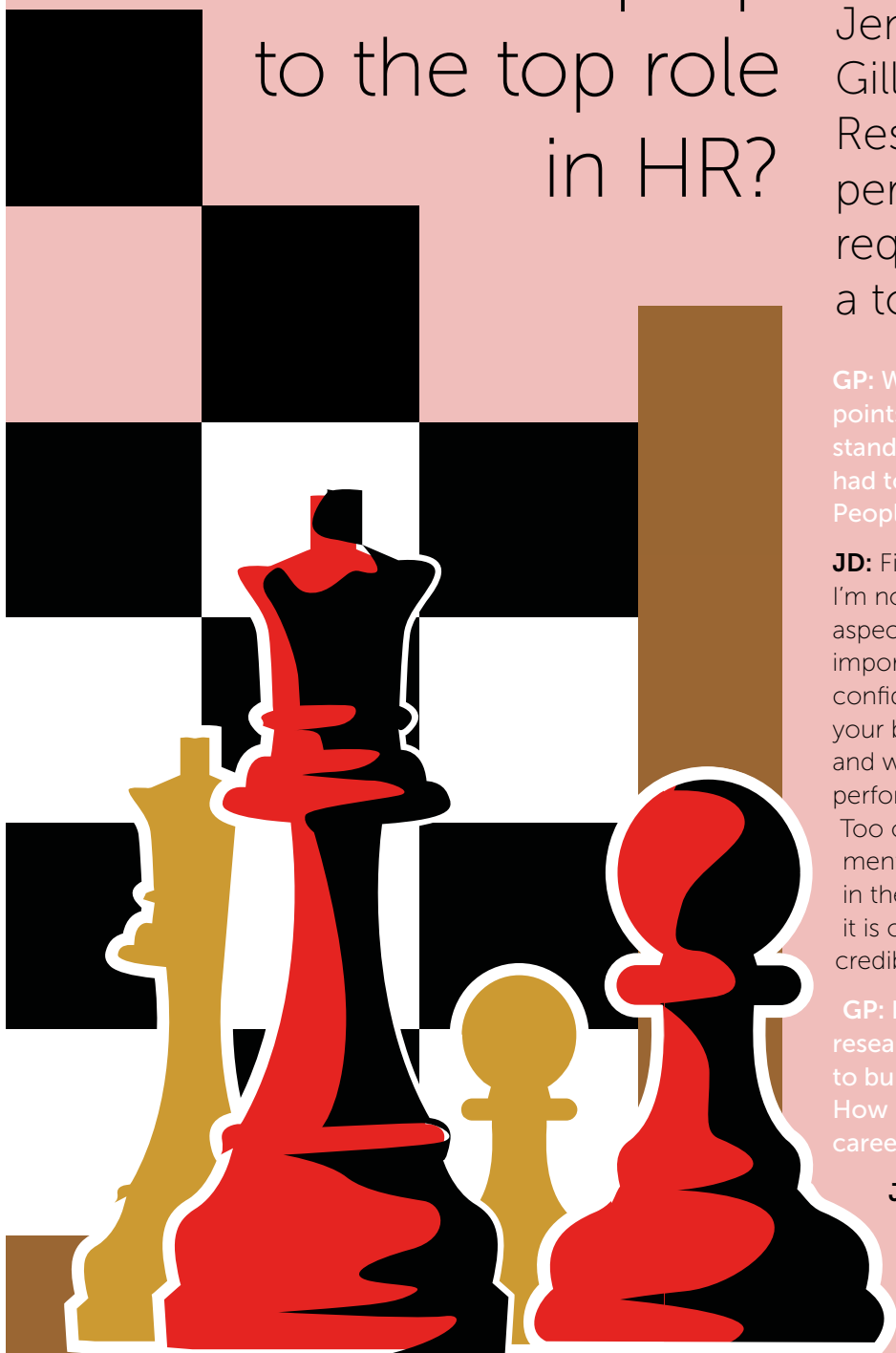


the 'right stuff' – what does it take to step up to the top role in HR?



Jennifer Duvalier has recently left the technology company ARM, where she was Chief People Officer. Jennifer shared with Gillian Pillans, CRF's Research Director, her perspective on the skills required for success in a top HR role.

GP: When you look at the key transition points in your HR career, what really stands out in terms of the skills you had to build to be successful as a Chief People Officer?

JD: First, it's about knowing your stuff. I'm not talking about the technical aspects of HR, although of course that's important. What really enables you to be confident and effective is understanding your business, how it's likely to evolve, and what levers you can pull to improve performance. Take margin, for example. Too often, when I ask the HR leaders I mentor what's the gross and net margin in their business, they don't know what it is or how to improve it. You can't be credible if you don't know these things.

GP: It's a consistent theme of CRF research, too: HR has to put in the work to build deep business understanding. How have you tackled this in your career?

JD: All too often, HR people want to show the value they can bring; they rush straight to the answer

without taking time to understand the tensions and trade-offs to be managed. The discipline for me is spending time with operating teams. Not just sitting in management meetings, but getting alongside people who run the business. I made a point of joining the fortnightly business review call where we discussed the sales pipeline. At first, I didn't understand what was going on as everyone spoke in acronyms. Afterwards, I would sit down with someone to help me process what decisions had been taken and why. You should make finance your friend – ask them to talk you through the numbers so you really understand them. It's also good for HR to do tours of duty in core areas of the business such as operations or sales, to really experience what drives organisational outcomes.

You should make finance your friend – ask them to talk you through the numbers so you really understand them.

GP: What difference does it make, when you do have that depth of commercial understanding as a Chief People Officer?

JD: One of the challenges for executive teams thinking about how their organisation needs to adapt to the digital economy, is to work out what the organisation's operating model should be. The Chief People Officer can play an important role in orchestrating these strategic discussions, for example what core strategic capabilities do we need to build to execute our strategy, and which capabilities should we retain in-house, as opposed to partnering with others to deliver our objectives. If you as Chief

People Officer don't understand how the business landscape is changing and the choices open to your organisation, how can you effectively marshal those conversations?

GP: Marshalling those conversations requires knowledge, but doesn't it also take confidence to speak up and challenge, and maybe put your neck on the line at times?

JD: Absolutely. I think, before you step into a senior executive HR role, you need to look deep within yourself and ask: am I prepared to be the truth teller in this organisation, even if it means taking on the ExCo, the CEO and the board? If you're not prepared to embrace that, you shouldn't take the job, because you will always be, to some degree, anxious. You have to be prepared to play the role fully, even if that means you might get fired. But there is something liberating about knowing you are ready to have the difficult conversations that are needed to push the business forward. You've looked into the dark abyss, and you're ok with whatever the outcome might be.

GP: So, be ready to face the dark night of the soul... How can you be prepared for that?

JD: First, you have to challenge yourself, to push your own boundaries and embrace new learning. Second, you need to build a supportive community around you, people either in your own or other organisations who can help you make sense of what's going on, what you need to do, and provide support and encouragement when it's tough. Fortunately in HR, we have a very strong community that you can tap into.

Gillian Pillans | Research Director |
Corporate Research Forum

[back to contents](#)



CRF Learning's
Becoming an
Effective HRD
Open Programme
is now open for
registration. Click
[here](#) for details.