

2026 EDITION

YOUR FIRST 180 DAYS DECIDE YOUR TENURE

The Chief People Officer Playbook 2026

*From Mandate to Momentum:
Your Strategic Guide to Leading
with Impact in 180 Days*

180 DAYS

8 MOVES

4 DISCIPLINES

For incoming CPOs — and sitting CPOs leading a strategy reset.



A PERSONAL NOTE

Dear Chief People Officer,

Whether you're stepping into the role for the first time — or rethinking your path in a shifting landscape — welcome. This moment will shape more than just your tenure. It will shape how HR shows up in your organisation and what kind of leader you become. Today's Chief People Officers (CPOs) are expected to be strategists, architects, catalysts, and coaches all at once. You must move quickly, build trust, and drive outcomes often within systems that were not designed for the speed or complexity you now face.

Since 2006 I have worked with more than 50 Chief People Officers — at PwC, at Deloitte, and now at PeopleCentriX. Global NGOs, stock-listed firms, family-owned businesses, intergovernmental organisations. Some took the seat for the first time. Others stepped in during a reset. What set the most impactful ones apart was never their resources. It was clarity of mandate, message and momentum. They did not wait for certainty. They shaped it.

That's what this Playbook is here to help you do. It's not a theory. It's not a checklist. It's a field-tested framework, shaped by real pressure, and built to guide your most defining moves.

Your first 180 days will set the tone for everything that follows — not just in what you deliver, but how you lead, how you're perceived, and what you make possible.

You don't get a second chance at a first move. But you do get this one. Lead it with clarity, courage, and intention.



[Tanguy Dulac, PhD](#)

Founder & Managing Partner

[PeopleCentriX](#)



YOUR CPO PLAYBOOK JOURNEY

1. The Moment and the Mandate

Why Today's CPO Must Lead Differently — and What It Takes to Deliver

2. Lead with Impact: Your First 180 Days in 8 Strategic Moves

From Mandate to Momentum

3. Your 180-Day Plan

Sequencing the Eight Moves into Four Phases

4. Who We Are

The People Behind This Playbook

Section 1

The Moment and the Mandate

*Why CPOs Must Lead Differently
—and What It Takes to Deliver*

“The essence of strategy is choosing what not to do.”
— Michael Porter





WHY THIS PLAYBOOK, WHY NOW

2026 is the noisiest year the CPO agenda has ever known. Across the ten trend reports we analysed for our [2026 HR Trends & Priorities Heatmap](#), the share of trends framed through AI leapt from 11% to 75% in a single year — while wellbeing fell out of the top twenty, and the WEF projects that one in five jobs will churn by 2030.

In all that churn, one priority held the top of every ranking: a clear HR value proposition, delivered through a fit-for-purpose operating model — exactly what this Playbook helps you build. Yet most CPOs still step into the role without a roadmap, expected to act fast, earn trust, and deliver strategic impact in systems that weren't built for this complexity.

This Playbook exists to change that.

It gives you a tested, practical guide to:

- Define your mandate with clarity and conviction
- Align your CEO, executive team, and HR leaders
- Translate ambition into a coherent people strategy
- Lead with momentum from Day One

Whether you're new in the role or leading a reset, this is your moment to lead with clarity, courage, and purpose.

This is your Playbook. Let's begin.



WHO THIS PLAYBOOK IS FOR

You're New to the Role / Transition Mode

You've just stepped into the Chief People Officer seat. Whether promoted internally or recruited externally, you face the urgent task of translating early trust into long-term credibility. You are expected to listen, move fast, stabilise the function, and articulate a people strategy that feels both grounded and bold.

This Playbook helps you:

- Clarify your mandate and avoid ambiguity
- Build momentum without overcommitting
- Earn trust and position HR as a strategic function
- Align early with your CEO, board, and business stakeholders
- Lead decisively — even before full context is clear

You're Not New—But the Context Is / Reset Mode

You've been in the role — but something fundamental has shifted. A new CEO. A strategic pivot. A loss of trust. Or a moment of realisation that HR's current impact no longer matches what the business needs. You don't need a restart. You need a reset — one that is sharp, strategic, and deeply aligned with today's business realities.

This Playbook helps you:

- Reassess expectations and stakeholder trust
- Refocus your agenda on today's business realities
- Rebuild alignment and leadership credibility
- Reposition HR as a system for business value — not a siloed function
- Regain control of the narrative and deliver with purpose



HOW TO USE THIS PLAYBOOK

This Playbook isn't a manual. It's a leadership partner — structured for action, designed for complexity, and built to meet you exactly where you are. Don't read it cover to cover: use it in the moments that matter most — clarifying your mandate, aligning stakeholders, shaping your team, or accelerating delivery.

EACH CHAPTER GIVES YOU

- **Strategic framing** — understand what's at stake and why it matters
- **Key questions** — sharpen your thinking and surface blind spots
- **Common pitfalls** — avoid credibility risks and typical missteps

THREE WAYS TO USE IT

- **A 180-day roadmap** — guide your onboarding, build trust, generate momentum
- **A reset framework** — realign your strategy after leadership or business shifts
- **A conversation tool** — engage your CEO, align peers, energise your HR function

Most leadership transitions stall because CPOs are expected to move fast without enough clarity, alignment, or support. **This Playbook helps you break that pattern — from your first move to your lasting impact.**



THE FOUR LEADERSHIP DISCIPLINES

There is no fixed playbook for this role. Your first year as CPO demands that you navigate complexity, make prompt, confident decisions, and lead with authority.

Your success rests on mastering four essential leadership disciplines:

Clarity → **Commitment** → **Capability** → **Confidence**

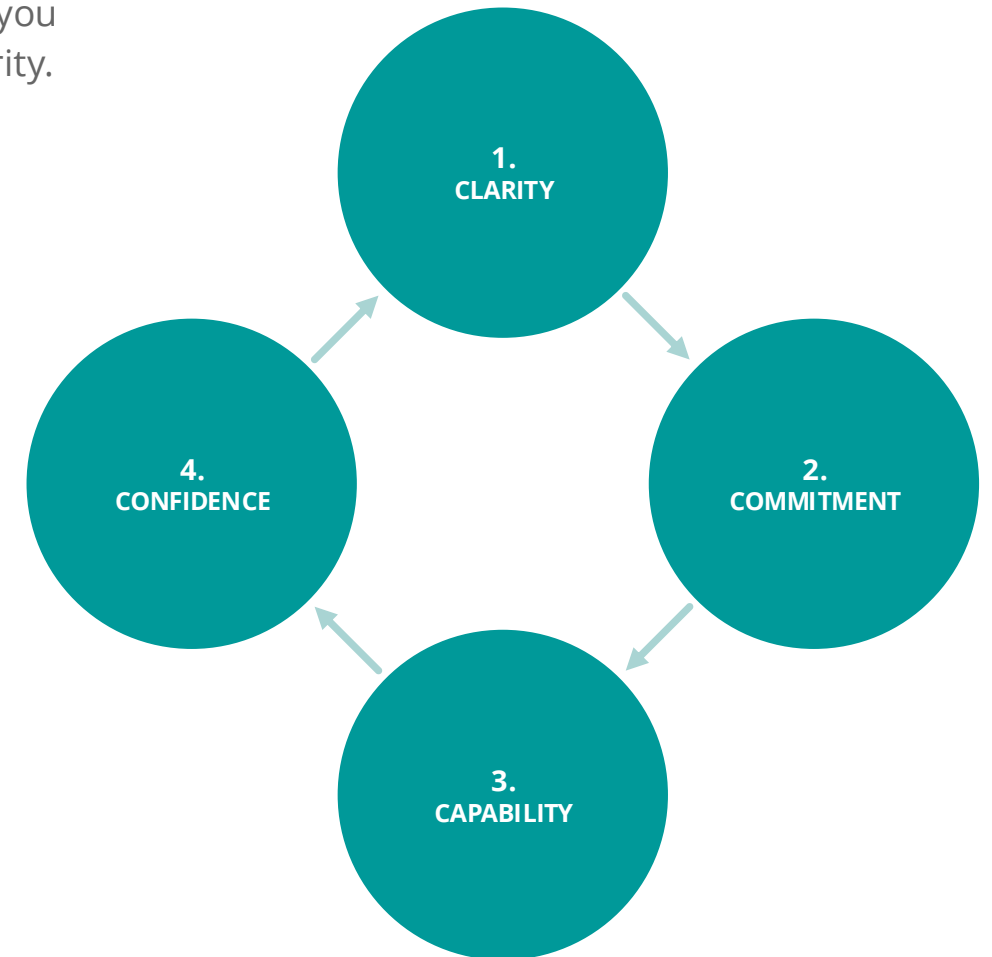
What this demands of you:

- Establish clear direction (CLARITY).
- Prioritise what truly matters (COMMITMENT).
- Build systems that deliver at scale (CAPABILITY).
- Lead with presence and trust (CONFIDENCE).

Each discipline marks a critical shift:

- from noise to focus (CLARITY).
- from insight to action (COMMITMENT).
- from design to delivery (CAPABILITY).
- from effort to influence (CONFIDENCE).

The goal is simple: lead decisively—and deliver lasting impact.





PUTTING THE 4Cs INTO PRACTICE

CLARITY

- Cut through the noise to see what truly matters.
- Decode power dynamics, surface real expectations, and establish a clear, shared direction.

Clarity turns urgency into strategic focus.

COMMITMENT

- Prioritise what truly matters—and commit to it.
- Focus on the few priorities that drive value—and align people and resources behind them.

Commitment turns insight into decisive action.

CONFIDENCE

- Lead with authority that earns trust.
- Show up with presence, precision, and conviction—so your influence is felt before you speak.

Confidence is your quiet advantage in the room.

CAPABILITY

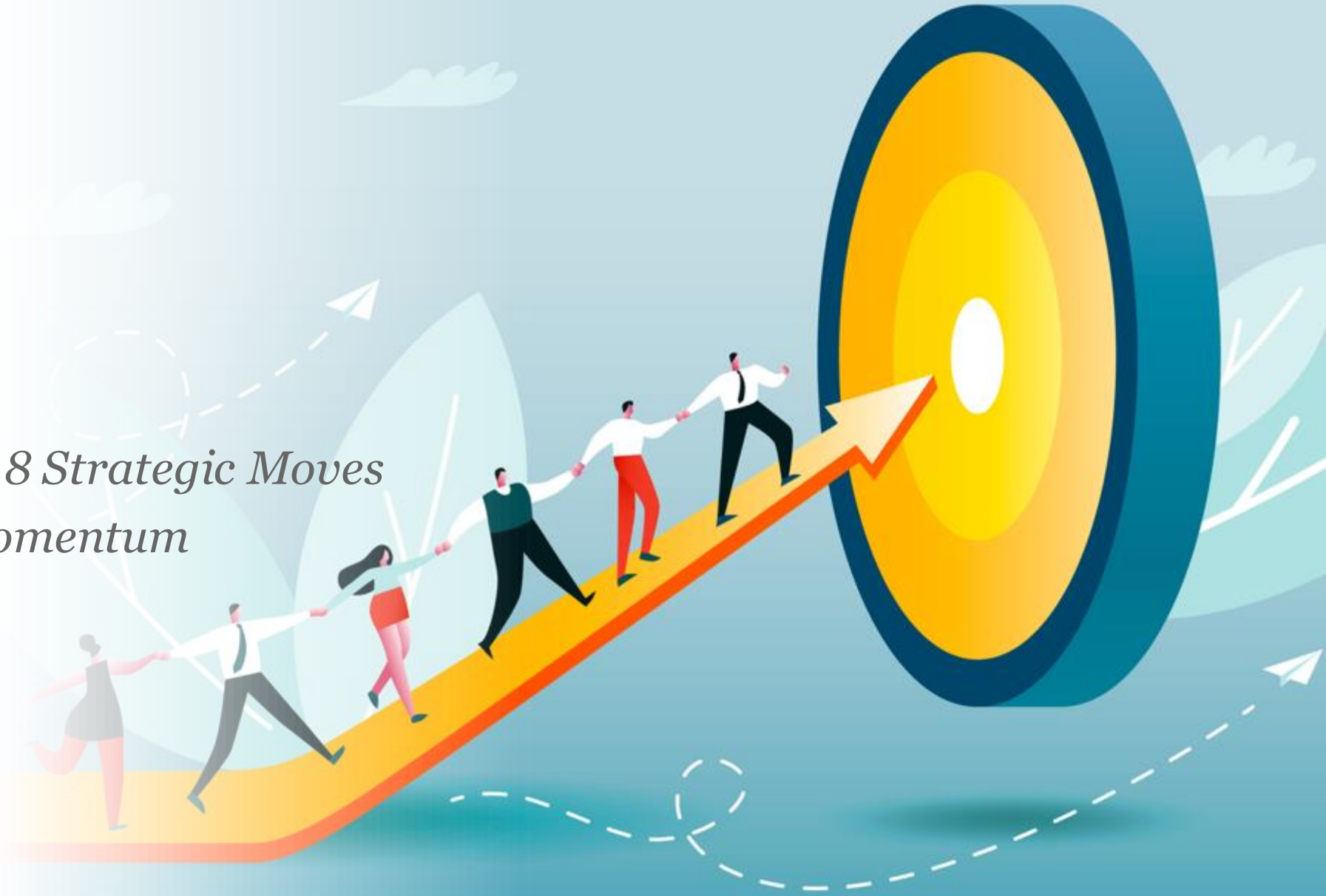
- Build the systems and teams that deliver at scale.
- Align roles, fix friction, and create the infrastructure to move from ideas to results.

Capability turns ambition into sustainable performance.

Section 2

Lead with Impact

*Your 180-Day Plan in 8 Strategic Moves
—from Mandate to Momentum*





YOUR 8 STRATEGIC MOVES

- **MOVE #1 | Align on What Matters**
Forge a shared purpose, define clear priorities, and agree on success measures.
- **MOVE #2 | Earn CEO and Board Trust**
Anchor HR's credibility at the top by speaking the language of strategy.
- **MOVE #3 | Craft a Coherent People Strategy**
Translate ambition into a focused, enterprise-aligned roadmap.
- **MOVE #4 | Build a World-Class HR Team**
Elevate talent, structure, and leadership to deliver with confidence and pace.
- **MOVE #5 | Design for Scalable Execution**
Engineer systems, roles, and tools that can flex, grow, and perform.
- **MOVE #6 | Shape Culture with Intention**
Embed behaviours and mindsets that accelerate business performance.
- **MOVE #7 | Lead with Strategic Communication**
Use narrative, presence, and dialogue to drive clarity and commitment.
- **MOVE #8 | Sustain Focus with Relentless Discipline**
Protect your agenda, track progress, and eliminate strategic drift.



MOVE #1 | ALIGN ON WHAT MATTERS



Why This Must Come First

The CPO role is rarely handed with clarity—it's earned through alignment. You can't lead if your priorities are vague or misunderstood. Before setting a strategy, establish what HR is here to achieve and how success will be measured. This is your moment to define the mandate, or risk having one defined for you.

What Success Looks Like

- CEO and CPO are fully aligned on HR's mission and value
- HR priorities directly advance the business agenda
- Stakeholders understand not just what HR will do—but why
- HR is positioned as a strategic driver, not a support function

Where to Focus First

- Ask: "What would make HR indispensable this year?"
- Identify power players and map expectations
- Translate business needs into 3–5 clear people priorities
- Draft your mandate and test it with the CEO

What to Avoid

- Assuming alignment still exists from a prior phase
- Confusing polite interest with true commitment
- Overcommitting to build goodwill
- Delaying focus to avoid difficult trade-offs

How to Show Up

Own the ambiguity. Be the one who brings clarity. Listen actively—but frame direction decisively. Alignment isn't granted—it's shaped. Your leadership begins the moment you step into this conversation.



MOVE #2 | EARN CEO AND BOARD TRUST



Why This Must Come Early

No CPO leads without trust at the top. Your agenda only travels as far as your credibility with the CEO and board. This means more than access—it's about whether they believe you can translate business ambition into human capability. Earn the right to operate at the strategic table. Without it, you'll be left executing someone else's plan.

What Success Looks Like

- CEO actively champions HR's strategic value
- Board sees HR as core to leadership, risk, and culture
- CPO is engaged in shaping—not just implementing—key decisions
- HR is seen as business-critical in times of uncertainty

Where to Focus First

- Ask: "What does my CEO need most from me this year?"
- Clarify how your success will be measured—then deliver early
- Engage key board members—understand their language, lens, and limits
- Position HR insights through business impact, not HR logic

What to Avoid

- Assuming proximity equals influence
- Getting caught in HR speak—lose your audience
- Treating the board as an obligation, not a lever
- Bringing tactical issues to strategic forums

How to Show Up

Show up as a peer—not just a partner. Speak the language of growth, risk, and leadership. Let data do the talking—but make insight your signature. The CPO who earns trust early leads boldly later.



MOVE #3 | CRAFT A COHERENT PEOPLE STRATEGY



Why This Is the Core of Your Credibility

Your value as CPO hinges on your ability to translate business ambition into human capability. That means moving beyond a list of HR initiatives to a coherent people strategy that focuses energy, guides investment, and delivers competitive advantage. A great strategy doesn't just align with the business—it advances it.

What Success Looks Like

- People strategy is anchored in business ambition and operating realities
- 3–5 priority shifts drive real impact across the employee lifecycle
- The executive team uses the strategy to guide decisions and trade-offs
- HR efforts are integrated, consistent, and visibly delivering value

Where to Focus First

- Ask: “What will it take—organisationally and culturally—for this company to win?”
- Distil the business agenda into a few people-led imperatives
- Pressure-test priorities with business leaders—then refine and commit
- Build a compelling story that leaders can retell and teams can act on

What to Avoid

- Equating volume with strategy—more slides don't mean more clarity
- Designing in a vacuum—without business ownership, you won't get lift-off
- Listing initiatives without explaining their 'why'
- Getting lost in models—your strategy must drive decisions

How to Show Up

Show up as a strategist, not a steward. Articulate your thinking with clarity and conviction. Prioritise relentlessly, and use the people strategy as your leadership platform. This is where you stop reacting—and start directing.



MOVE #4 | BUILD A WORLD-CLASS HR TEAM



Why This Is Your Force Multiplier

You can't transform the organisation with a team that's struggling to deliver today. Your influence scales only through the quality and capability of your HR leaders. Don't inherit the past—reshape it. Talent, credibility, and cohesion in your HR team will define your impact.

What Success Looks Like

- You have the right leaders in the right roles, aligned to your agenda
- HR operates as one team—with clear priorities and accountability
- Business leaders trust and seek out HR as thought partners
- Team culture is energised, ambitious, and fit for the future

Where to Focus First

- Ask: “Do I have a team I would bet my success on?”
- Assess individual capabilities, motivations, and influence
- Define what great HR looks like—then raise the bar
- Create quick wins together to build confidence and momentum

What to Avoid

- Delaying tough calls to protect relationships
- Tolerating mediocrity for the sake of stability
- Letting past org charts dictate future roles
- Managing the team as a collection of individuals, not a system

How to Show Up

Be clear, fair, and future-focused. Set high standards—and support people to meet them. Build trust fast by investing time, asking real questions, and giving honest feedback. A strong HR team is your first—and most visible—proof point.



MOVE #5 | DESIGN FOR SCALABLE EXECUTION



Why This Multiplies Your Effect

Strategy without infrastructure is just aspiration. To deliver at scale, HR must be intentionally designed—lean, agile, and business-aligned. The right design doesn't add complexity; it removes friction. Without a scalable model, even great ideas stall under their own weight.

What Success Looks Like

- The HR operating model is streamlined, strategic, and future-ready
- Core processes and tools are enablers—not bottlenecks
- HR roles and interfaces are sharp, consistent, and decision-oriented
- People practices scale with quality and coherence across geographies

Where to Focus First

- Ask: “What must HR deliver with speed, clarity, and repeatability?”
- Diagnose how structure, roles, and tech either serve—or slow—delivery
- Simplify accountabilities across COEs, HRBPs, and operations
- Build system-wide enablers—analytics, platforms, and workflows that scale

What to Avoid

- Designing for exceptions instead of the rule
- Overweighting structure while underinvesting in enablement
- Building in silos—operating model, tech, and capability must align
- Defaulting to inherited models—start with your strategy, not your org chart

How to Show Up

Lead like a systems thinker. Zoom out to connect the dots—then zoom in to remove friction. Be relentless about fit-for-purpose design. When infrastructure flows, strategy accelerates.



MOVE #6 | SHAPE CULTURE WITH INTENTION



Why This Shapes What Lasts

Culture is the invisible force that enables—or blocks—strategy. Every decision you make as CPO signals what matters. Culture doesn't just happen—it's shaped. To lead it, you must first name it, then model it, and ultimately embed it. Done right, culture becomes your most enduring source of performance.

What Success Looks Like

- A clear cultural ambition is defined and shared across leadership
- Behaviours, rituals, and systems reinforce the desired culture
- Cultural legacies are acknowledged—and actively reshaped
- HR is seen as a steward of mindsets, not just processes

Where to Focus First

- Ask: “What behaviours will help us win—and what must shift?”
- Listen across levels to understand lived culture, not just stated values
- Equip leaders to model the shift—in how they lead, decide, and communicate
- Link culture to performance—make it real, not just aspirational

What to Avoid

- Treating culture as a communication campaign
- Equating values posters with behaviour change
- Relying only on surveys—go deeper into informal norms and power
- Delaying action under the guise of more diagnosis

How to Show Up

Be the conscience and catalyst. Speak candidly about what helps—and what harms—performance. Use symbolic moments to reinforce change. Above all, lead by example. Culture shifts when leaders do.



MOVE #7 | LEAD WITH STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION



Why This Is a Strategic Weapon

Execution hinges on belief—and belief is built through narrative. Communication isn't just how you inform, it's how you lead. As CPO, your words shape meaning, momentum, and morale. In moments of ambiguity, people don't just hear what you say—they watch what you repeat. If you don't own the story, someone else will.

What Success Looks Like

- The people strategy has a compelling narrative that leaders can retell
- Employees understand the 'why'—and their role in making it real
- Messages cascade with clarity, not dilution, across the organisation
- Communication sparks alignment, energy, and action—not just awareness

Where to Focus First

- Ask: "What do people need to believe to move?"
- Frame the narrative: one story, many voices, consistent signal
- Anchor communication in business outcomes, not HR language
- Equip leaders with tools and talking points they'll actually use

What to Avoid

- Defaulting to updates—strategy doesn't live in PowerPoint
- Letting noise drown the signal—be disciplined in what you repeat
- Confusing volume with impact—more channels ≠ more clarity
- Treating storytelling as optional—it's how strategy sticks

How to Show Up

Be intentional. Lead with language that inspires belief and action. Don't just share facts—create meaning. Shape the conversation in rooms you're in and influence those you're not. Great CPOs use communication not as decoration, but as direction.



MOVE #8 | SUSTAIN FOCUS WITH RELENTLESS DISCIPLINE



Why This Turns Intent into Impact

Anyone can launch an initiative—few can sustain momentum. In a sea of priorities, your power lies in disciplined focus. Without it, HR becomes reactive and diluted. With it, you build credibility, accelerate outcomes, and protect what matters. Strategy survives not through passion—but through precision.

What Success Looks Like

- People priorities stay visible, resourced, and actively managed
- Noise is filtered—attention stays on what moves the business
- Progress is measured and acted on, not just reported
- You are known for finishing well—not just starting strong

Where to Focus First

- Ask: “What am I willing to stop to protect our top priorities?”
- Establish a cadence—moments to review, refocus, and reallocate
- Set clear rules of engagement for what gets airtime and what doesn’t
- Use dashboards that highlight traction, not just activity
- Model sharp decision-making—choose fewer, better, faster

What to Avoid

- Letting the agenda bloat to please stakeholders
- Managing by inbox—your calendar reveals your real priorities
- Allowing ‘strategic drift’ to become cultural default
- Treating delivery as an afterthought to design

How to Show Up

Be sharp, principled, and unapologetic about focus. Say no with purpose. Drive rhythm into the system. Your consistency becomes a leadership signal. In a world of ambition, discipline is the differentiator.



YOUR 180-DAY PLAN

	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6	Month 7 and beyond
Align on What Matters							
Earn CEO and Board Trust							
Craft a Coherent People Strategy							
Build a World-Class HR Team							
Design for Scalable Execution							
Shape Culture with Intention							
Lead with Strategic Communication							
Sustain Focus with Relentless Discipline							



THE FOUR PHASES AT A GLANCE

PHASE 1 Months 1–2

Align on What Matters

- Clarify your mandate with CEO and Board.
- Identify 3–5 people priorities that drive business value.
- Launch structured stakeholder listening.
- Build early trust through decisive focus.

PHASE 2 Months 3–5

Craft and Commit to Strategy

- Finalise and socialise your People Strategy.
- Pressure-test priorities with the executive team.
- Define what success will look like.
- Begin shaping culture and leadership expectations.

PHASE 3 Months 5–6

Build for Delivery

- Design a streamlined, scalable HR operating model.
- Align teams, roles, and processes.
- Launch early enablers (analytics, communication, systems).
- Strengthen accountability and decision rhythms.

PHASE 4 Beyond 180 days

Sustain & Scale

- Track progress on strategic priorities.
- Adapt and evolve as context changes.
- Embed the four disciplines: Clarity, Commitment, Capability, Confidence.
- Reinforce culture and build lasting impact.

The bars behind these phases — your 180-day plan on the previous page — overlap by design: alignment never stops, and delivery starts before design is perfect.



THE THREE ALIGNMENTS

A people strategy fails in three structurally different ways — and each failure needs a different remedy. **The eight moves are designed to close all three gaps.**

VERTICAL FIT

“Are we doing the right things?”

Failure mode: Irrelevance — HR is busy and well-regarded — but the business doesn’t feel it.

The test: *If we removed this initiative, what would the business notice?*

The remedy: Re-derive priorities from the business strategy — and kill what doesn’t contribute.

Felt by the executive team.

HORIZONTAL FIT

“Are we telling one story?”

Failure mode: Cynicism — The values say one thing; pay, promotion, and managers say another.

The test: *Does our reward system pay for what our values ask for?*

The remedy: Redesign practices so every signal converges on one message.
Felt by employees.

DELIVERY FIT

“Are we built to deliver it consistently?”

Failure mode: Inconsistency — The same policy produces different experiences across the organisation.

The test: *Does one policy create one experience — everywhere?*

The remedy: Redesign accountabilities, governance, and data.
Felt by managers.

Grounded in four decades of strategic HRM research — Baird & Meshoulam (1988) · MacDuffie (1995) · Wright & Snell (1998).



WHERE DO YOU STAND?

Before you plan your next move, take stock. Rate yourself on each of the eight moves — from **1 (not started)** to **5 (fully in place)**.

1. Align on What Matters
2. Earn CEO and Board Trust
3. Craft a Coherent People Strategy
4. Build a World-Class HR Team
5. Design for Scalable Execution
6. Shape Culture with Intention
7. Lead with Strategic Communication
8. Sustain Focus with Relentless Discipline

1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5

Your total: 32–40 — protect momentum **24–31** — focus your resets **below 24** — sequence ruthlessly
Anything scored 3 or below is where your next 90 days live — start with the lowest score that carries the highest business stakes.



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**You don't get a second chance
at a first move.**

But you do get this one.

Lead it with clarity, courage, and intention.

180 days · 8 moves · 4 disciplines