

Cindy Lu: Well, hello there. This is Cindy Lu with HR Mastermind Peer Advisory Boards. I'm here with Debbie Dennis, the Chief Customer Officer and Chief HR Officer for Oncor. I'm going to have Debbie tell you a little bit more about her background in a minute. But we're going to talk a little bit about the whole concept of coaching, especially as it relates to influencing the C-suite.

Debbie, you are so good at that, and I think that the world needs to hear your knowledge and wisdom. But first, tell us a little bit about your background. I think you have such an interesting and unique background.

Debbie Dennis: Cindy, thank you, and thanks for asking me to do this. I will tell you, I don't necessarily know that I'm always good at it, but I do think it's important. So a little bit about me. I would have never, ever imagined that I would be an officer of the company. The way I started out, I've actually been with the same company, although it's changed a lot, for 40 years now. It's kind of scary, started young.

But my first entry into the organization, actually my degree is in home economics education. Now I always tell people that degree had a lot of psychology and philosophy in it, which is really when you're dealing with people, whether it's customer or employees, you need a little bit of those skills. So that's how I started. I came to Texas, my husband was transferred down here to open a glass plant. So we came down here, and I started networking to find a home economics teaching position.

In that process, I met a woman who had responsibility for the home economics program in Garland and [inaudible 00:01:37] school districts, and she was best friends with a woman, who was a home economist, for what was called Texas Power and Light at the time. So she said, "You should go apply for that job." Well, when I got to school, those utility home economist roles were really kind of the cool things that people talked about doing.

So I went and applied, and the rest is history. They hired me in the operating company. At the time, there were over 100 women that work for the utility that did that, it was a customer service role. So my first foray into the business was in customer service, and it was about helping customers. So I did that about eight years, and I could see the writing on the wall that that was a nice to-do and wouldn't necessarily be a long-term role to have. Although it was fun, and the women ... It was a great job, I loved it.

So I started looking at how I could expand my horizons. I actually did a little bit of engineering design work for the company, which helped me to understand how we deliver electricity. Then I had a great boss who encouraged me to apply for a role in what was called personnel. We talked about this the other day at the time. So utility, our utility company anyway, really grew our own HR people, in a lot of respects. So we would find people inside the organization that

understood the business, but also had the people skills and could coach and help people.

So that was my first opportunity. I applied for a role in HR and was successful. Then it was really that first time I was in HR, I was there about 13 years, and had my first opportunity to lead and supervise people. That was my first go-around. At the end of the day, after a number of years in HR promoting up to a director level, I had the opportunity to be a lone lobbyist, one session for the company.

Cindy Lu: Uh-oh. Hold on a second.

Debbie Dennis: [inaudible 00:03:26] was how it affected our business. Then after that, when I came back, there were a number of executives and the Vice President of procurement and supply chain for the utility. We were integrating utility at the time, all aspects of the business. So our CEO, Earl Nye, came to me one day and said, "We want to promote you to an officer and put you as responsibility for procurement and supply chain." Well, I hadn't ever done that. [crosstalk 00:03:53]

Yeah, but that's a part of the business. It was a wonderful opportunity to learn how we source in supply chain, and just understanding the business and the services that we buy and the products we buy. So I did that about three years, an amazing experience. One of my colleagues had been promoted to an officer, he had been in supply chain procurement, they put him over HR. So we were great buddy peers, we could call each other and say, "Hey, I don't know what I'm doing." So it was a great opportunity.

I did that three years, I loved it. Then the CEO asked me to come back to HR and be the VP of HR. He was coming close to retirement, and so I did that. Then it was a little bit of an interesting journey between that time, because my 40 years, it's long, but for a while I managed an outsourcing that we had, because a CEO outsourced all of our shared services, about 4,000 employees, and I was part of the group that managed that, and then later had the chance to come to the regulated utility. My first time back into the regulated utility, my responsibilities were customer service again. I worked with the city of Dallas, city council, the mayor, because we have a lot of work with the city. So then I came back into the customer side of the business.

Then the CEO of Oncor, Bob Shapard, then asked me, when the HR executive was going to retire, if I would come back to HR. So I did that in 2012, and then most recently when a transaction closed where we have a new owner, 80% owner, and still [inaudible 00:05:22], still independent. Now Allen Nye is our CEO, and he asked me, to not only keep my responsibilities in HR, but also be the Chief Customer Officer. So it's been full circle, it's been great.

Cindy Lu: That's awesome. This is a little off topic, but getting to know the business, I'm sure has helped you so much in your HR career. That's not always so easy to do.

It sounds like Oncor is very progressive in getting people to rotate, right? Through the organization. I think we ... okay, there you're back.

In any case, I don't know if you have advice for people on how to raise your hand for that, to get experience outside of HR.

Debbie Dennis: I think it's important to do and to look for those opportunities, including, by the way, even if it feels like, in some ways, that it might be a step back, but you gain so much credibility with the business, because you've been in the business, so you've walked in their shoes. The other thing is, it changes how you look at things. I would tell you that when I, having been in supply chain and then coming back, but then being in the role with the city of Dallas, it just really changed how I view what we should be doing from a human resource strategy standpoint.

Really at the end of the day, the customer experience is driven by our employees. If our employees have a great experience, our customers can have a great experience.

Cindy Lu: Yeah. You know what? You can absolutely tell. Any consumer, I think your experience, you can almost tell if there's good leadership in HR, based on the experience you have.

Debbie Dennis: Right, right. So I'm just going to tell you, I would tell people, say, "Raise your hand, ask for a rotational assignment." Even if that doesn't work, if the company's small, do ride-alongs. I call them ride-alongs, go ask to spend the day. This is often said, "Spend time with your CFO, understand the business." Because when you can make the things about people make sense to the financial, and there are clearly financial implications, again, you're going to get credibility. So that's critical.

Cindy Lu: Right, right. Well, so in our most recent CHRO skill survey, we found a number of different, very important, highly-ranked skills that senior executives voted. One of them was coaching skills, right? We defined that as the ability to influence the C-suite. So why do you think that's so important, Debbie, to hone that skill?

Debbie Dennis: I think that a CHRO cannot be successful without it. So if you think about it, people that reach that C-suite level, they get there for a couple of reasons. I mean, almost always they're smart, they understand the business. In some businesses like ours, they may be really technically smart, but they also have a good size ego. So you have to finesse, but if you can't coach, you can't walk in there and say, "We can't do this or you shouldn't do this," it'll fail. They'll stop asking, they'll stop including you. So I think without it, you can't be successful as a CHRO, it just doesn't work.

Cindy Lu: When it's done well, how does it feel?

Debbie Dennis: Oh, when it's done well, it feels amazing, by the way. I think the interesting thing is, most CHRO's are this way. So when it goes well, it's usually not when I'm getting the recognition. If this makes sense, when it goes well, it's when my boss looks good, when my colleagues look good, when he's getting employees that are reaching out, because of something we might've finessed on the back end, and they're saying, "Wow, you're amazing."

Because that's the other thing that people assume, is that people at the top level don't need that appreciation and affirmation. It's alone in CHRO, I always feel alone a lot of the time. I always tell people, "We want to know when we do well. We want to know when we don't do well, but not in public." So I think that's the key, that's when it feels good.

I probably have a number of examples of that, but you have to be willing ... For me, it's not when I get credit, it's when I see my boss and even my colleagues shine in a way, when they're doing something that matters to people, and it's because I've somehow coached them along the way. It could take several times and suddenly they get it, the light bulb comes on.

Cindy Lu: Right. So what are three tips? And keep in mind, many of the people watching this may not be in the C-suite, and this kind of influence can be effective, even if you're not talking to the C-suite, right? But what are three tips that people can maybe use?

Debbie Dennis: When I think about, and I think to your point, Cindy, this would be applicable to whether you were coaching C-suite, individual or another leader. But I think you have to start with, you have to get to know the person. We always think of the book that's been around for years, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*. At the end of the day, when you read that book, it's about listening and listening and listening and showing an interest and asking questions. So I think you have to understand who you're trying to coach.

Even if leaders look alike, they're different in the way that they like to be coached, or even if they've never said it outright or where they're most approachable about coaching. So I think that's the first step, is getting to know whoever it is that you're trying to coach and really showing that you care about them, and that you have an interest in what their challenges are. Then thinking and understanding, after you understand their challenges, then you're better positioned to give them ideas that will help them be successful. That's one tip.

I think it's critical for a CHRO, because if a CHRO does what they need to do, they really are the advisor to the, I believe, not only the CEO, but the entire senior leadership team, they're the voice for the people. That may feel alone, and I find, in my case, there's other voices for people. But at the end of the day, I think the CHRO really wears that responsibility.

So the other thing I would say, is you have to know the business when you're coaching. Because again, over time when you know the business, they'll listen to you. So this isn't just about going in there and coaching them about some soft skill about how they're coming across. It probably is about that, but you get more credibility when you understand the business and they know that you have this intellectual curiosity for the business.

I had a CEO tell me one time, he found it really frustrating that an HR executive one time, every time they were in meetings, the only time they paid attention was when they were talking about stuff related directly to people, and the rest of the time they'd be looking down. Whether they were or not, it was perceived they didn't care.

Cindy Lu: Well, if they didn't ask a lot of questions-

Debbie Dennis: Yeah. I think that's the other thing, is ask a lot of questions. Now some people say, "Oh, I'm afraid it's not a good question." But I would tell you most people, whether it's your CFO, they're not going to view any question as stupid, they're going to be glad that you have an interest and want to understand. Even if you aren't going to do that in the setting with the group, it gives you an opportunity to go back and say, "Would you help me understand this?" Then it positions you better to be able to coach. So you have to understand the business.

Cindy Lu: That's great. I love that advice. That intellectual curiosity is key.

Debbie Dennis: And it gives you credibility. Again, if you understand the business, it gives you credibility. You can do that by certainly getting rotational assignments. But it is that intellectual curiosity about everything that's important to business, so you can tie it back.

Then the third really important tip, it goes back to this whole how do you win friends and influence people, is you have to listen. I think with people in the C-suite and a CEO, it takes a lot more listening before you decide to step in and coach. So, it's listening and watching, even others have that the CEO may respect, and how they approach when they're trying to convince the CEO about something. Does that make sense?

Cindy Lu: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah.

Debbie Dennis: So it's almost like looking at others that appear to already have that influence about other things, and how does that work when they're actually, in some ways, coaching the CEO? Even if it doesn't sound like coaching. I have an example where one of my colleagues, the CEO came in, and he had this idea of something that he thought we should do and we should do it immediately. Instead of going, "Oh my gosh, no, we can't do that," the individual thought and then he said, "Well, we could do that." Then calmly gave about two or three

very sound, and this was in a group forum, sound bites to the CEO who said, "Gosh, you're right, we shouldn't do that."

I say that, because I thought to myself, if he had said something like, "We're going to fire that guy because whatever," on the spur of the moment I would have gone, "Oh my gosh, no, we can't do that." But how do you calmly kind of step back and listen? So I would say listen, and then choose where you want to coach carefully.

Cindy Lu: And pick your-

Debbie Dennis: It's almost like choose the hill you want to ... hills, hill or hills you want to die on, and how critical is it? Sometimes you can wait and you have more information, more facts, to choose that it'll resonate more with the CEO or a C-suite colleague.

Cindy Lu: Yeah, that's excellent. I love it. So, get to know them, right? Part of that is making sure they know you care about them, and to do that, if you're asking great questions and you're intellectually curious, they're automatically going to know that you care. Do more listening, I love that. So, make sure you're listening more and maybe not just reacting. Then finally, sort of choose where and how often you want to coach-

Debbie Dennis: How often, where and when. For sure, generally for anybody that's an executive not in a public forum, catch them. Then I have to do this too with almost everybody, is watch for those signals of their mood, when you're ready to do that. If it's been a stressful day, not a good time. So that's where I'm back to you have to get to know the people. You have to get to know them, what's important to them. Not everybody's open from what goes on in their personal life, but just being interested in their family and other things. It's all about relationships, I think at the end of the day.

Cindy Lu: Yeah.

Debbie Dennis: If you have a relationship, you'll be ready to coach, even to the point where they'll start asking you, "What did you think? How did I do?"

Cindy Lu: And that feels good.

Debbie Dennis: That feels really good.

Cindy Lu: Right, right, right, exactly. That's great. What's interesting to me is, I think there's a lot of people who might be like, "Yeah, well she's in the C-suite and she's an officer of the company, and I'm not going to be that confident, right, to be able to coach executives." There's a lot of, for example, middle-market HR leaders who are the top HR person, but they aren't in the C-suite, right? So there's this sort of disconnect.

- Debbie Dennis: Yes.
- Cindy Lu: But I think with your tips, anybody can gain that confidence, right? Regardless of what seat at the table you have at the moment.
- Debbie Dennis: Yeah, and the other thought on that, by the way, in that circumstance, I would also suggest, back to my point about watching colleagues that can influence the CEO, and not that you would intentionally go to somebody else and say, "Hey, I think our boss needs this coaching." But generally speaking, other people that care about people probably see those same gaps. So it's like thinking of ways, I don't know, maybe this is a little sneaky, where somebody else on the team can help coach. I mean, again, it's back to where are those opportunities? And developing those relationships.
- Cindy Lu: Yeah. So I ran a small company before, and so since we didn't have a CHRO, I actually hired my own coach, right? So, I tend to be very direct, and so I would ask her to help me. I had these 911 calls with her where I'd be like, "What I want to say, help me phrase it so it doesn't kill this person," right?
- Debbie Dennis: For you. I mean, I guess I would say, how did you know to do that, Cindy? Because a lot of people wouldn't have even, they'd say, "I don't care, I'm the CEO."
- Cindy Lu: Yeah, no, you just make one person cry once and you're like, "That was not good." I can't talk that way to most people, right? So, yeah, yeah, especially when you're a small company, you're pretty flat and you have all different age groups reporting to you. So, I think as people get into higher levels, they get thicker skin and can handle more directness. But I had to learn. I think that, quite frankly, the Chinese culture, the language is just very direct. So, even though I don't have an accent, right? This is not my first language, and so, I think that had some influence. I was like, "I need to get some help."
- Debbie Dennis: Good for you, not everybody sees that. Because that's the other thing that I didn't talk about. But even when you're trying to coach, the person has to be willing to be coached. So that's the other thing, even with all these things, and that's why the relationship's so important.
- Cindy Lu: Right, right. They know your heart's in the right place.
- Debbie Dennis: Yes. Yes, definitely.
- Cindy Lu: Well Debbie, this has been awesome. Thank you so much. This is going to be so helpful to those listening. One last question for you. How important has having a peer group for you, and having people at your level, into your career and to help your company?

Debbie Dennis: I think it's been great. So, back to the point about feeling alone sometimes. When you're the HR executive inside a company, some of the things that we talk about is peers, I can't talk to my other peers about. It's stuff they don't mean to know, because it could create other sort of confidentiality issues. Not that we talk about specific people in our sessions, but I get so many ideas about, sometimes it's helpful to know everybody kind of has the same challenges. So misery loves company, maybe.

I'm not alone there. But also the best practices, being able to use it as a sounding board. When we talk about employee engagement, all those things, it's just tremendously valuable. It's really a safe environment to have those conversations, confidentially. Yeah, and really open up to show maybe where you feel like I don't want to show that I'm weak or scared about something, but we can have those conversations as a group. It's been great. I think it's wonderful.

Cindy Lu: I think you said it best, I think you said it's like a gift to yourself.

Debbie Dennis: Yes, it is a gift to myself.

Cindy Lu: All right. Well, Debbie, thank you so much and we look forward to seeing you at the big HR event this fall. You'll be mentoring for us, so we'll look forward to seeing you then.

Debbie Dennis: Me too. Thank you. Thanks for asking.

Cindy Lu: Okay, take care.

Debbie Dennis: Okay, bye.