

# Disrupt Yourself Podcast

## EPISODE 262: JOHNNY C. TAYLOR, JR.

Welcome back to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, where we provide strategies and advice on how to climb the S-curve of learning in your professional and personal life. Stepping back from who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson. The future of work is always hotly discussed, especially in a world forever changed by a global pandemic. Work from home, hybrid offices, flexible hours, and sick leave in the age of COVID. Those on the front line of this transformation are HR professionals, stereotyped, perhaps unfairly, as the ones to bug about benefits and payroll. But Johnny C. Taylor has a different perspective on this role. Johnny is the CEO of the Society for Human Resources Management, frequently called SHRM. It's an organization that educates and advises HR professionals on everything related to labor and management. Because he's been the chief human resources officer at huge companies. He knows this role inside and out. He's also a lawyer and previously the president and CEO of the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, which represents students at historically black colleges and universities across the U.S. When the pandemic hit, Johnny was in the midst of writing a new book. And when COVID didn't go away, after the first few weeks, it completely changed his angle. *Reset. A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval* is about how people's relationship with work is fundamentally different in the modern era and what executives need to know to stay competitive when it comes to talent. I loved talking with Johnny. You are in for a treat.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right, Johnny, I'm so excited to be having this conversation.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Well, it's a long time coming. So excited as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's start with a crucible moment.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Wow. So, this is fascinating. I was the, I was a newly minted VP of HR at Blockbuster. So, by the way, that's going to date me a little bit, right? There was once a company called Blockbuster. I was in Fort

Lauderdale, Florida. And this is a, I haven't told this story a lot, but it really changed my leadership trajectory. I was, I came to, let me set it up. I came to HR through the law. So, I was a big law firm lawyer, worked on complex commercial litigation. I was hired into Blockbuster to work on big class-action lawsuits. And then I had a knack for HR and employment-related issues, including union matters. Well, I was promoted into the VP of HR role, and I had a colleague who worked with me who we decided was not going to make it. She simply was not performing well. So, we had a conversation with her, and it was, let's just say, less than empathetic in our approach. The next morning, I came into the office, and I saw a lot of people running around the office. People seemed bothered about something, and I was quickly ushered into my office to break the bad news. She'd committed suicide that night. She went home, killed herself in the presence of her seven or nine-year-old daughter. I was crushed. I was devastated because, while my job was, it would forever include separating people's employment. I mean, hopefully, the good side of it is you're hiring and oftentimes you're promoting and there's a lot of good to it.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** But the other side of this job is helping people separate from an organization. We did not do it with the level of empathy that we should have. And it was a real turning point. We had. Yes. Checked all of the boxes. We've crossed the T's and dot the I's because I'm a lawyer. And we were more focused on ensuring that we did not have any legal risk after we separated this employee. And I can tell you now, as I reflect on it, we did not focus enough on the human side of this and how to do it. It wasn't done without dignity and respect. We were, of course, civil, and appropriate. It was not an ugly event, but we did not do it with empathy. And from that point forward, it became something I was committed to. I had to learn through counseling that ultimately, I don't think I was the cause, or we were the cause of the woman taking her life. We weren't the sole cause for sure, but the obligation that I undertook as a leader, a personal obligation, was that no matter the circumstance, even when someone had done something really bad in the organization, theft, whatever, that I would always be guided by empathy, even when having to separate an employee. And so that was a big leadership turning point for me.

**Whitney Johnson:** How old were you?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** I was 28 years old.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, you were young. So, you've got many years now since then to be able to make meaning of this in a really redemptive way. How long did it take you to do that? Was it months? Was it years?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** So, interestingly, this is an odd answer that I'm going to give you. I still deal with it, in its own way. I don't sleep the night before I have to have a conversation like this. And oftentimes my colleagues will tell you I don't sleep the night afterwards because I am so concerned about the human being and my impact on that human being and their stakeholders, their children, their husbands, partners, spouses, what have you, that it continues. I don't know that I'll ever get over it. And in a really fascinating way, I don't ever want to get over it. Because it keeps me mindful and keeps sort of upfront and in my face how important it is to remember that behind every one of these decisions as a human being and other human beings who are related to that human being, either through family, through intimate relationships, friendships, etc. So, it's a really interesting answer. But if you're asking the specific question around how long before I stopped blaming myself and doubting, you know, it was probably four or five months. And I, actually, that was my first-time using EAP, the employee assistance program at the time, which wasn't particularly good if, you know, frankly, they're not that great these days. The offering is not comparable to health care insurance. But I used it because I really did struggle. I was a young leader, and this was very devastating to me personally.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah, yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** As I start so heavy. Oh, you know, for a pivotal point. And that's what comes to mind.

**Whitney Johnson:** I'm actually really glad that you did. And so, as I listen to you share that I'm a person of faith. And so, I actually look at that and think this life isn't just all there is. There's much more to this. And so, as I think about this and the experience that she had and the experience that you had, I think about the gifts that she gave you and all of the probably at this point, given your career and all the people that you influence, thousands, hundreds of thousands, millions of people whose lives are different because of that experience that you had.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** You know, until you said that, I wouldn't have thought about it that way. But you're absolutely right. There was a sacrifice of sorts that occurred. And again, I have to believe that, that, that one situation, that instance of losing one's job wasn't the sole cause of this.

**Whitney Johnson:** No, of course not. Of course not.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** It's not. That broke the camel's back or what have you. But, at the end of the day, you're so right, because every subsequent interaction with human beings and employees was impacted and influenced by how that influenced me. Then it really was a gift in a very, very weird way.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And thank you for sharing that with me. And that's to my point that I have never gotten over it. And every time I talk about it, I learn something from it. And you just really, not that I'm trying to make myself feel better, but it really is important to think what if that hadn't happened? How many more of those might I have? Termination settings might I have engaged in and not had the appropriate level of empathy and frankly, sympathy in some circumstances.

**Whitney Johnson:** So beautiful. Thank you for sharing that. And I know that our listeners are really going to benefit from your willingness to share that. You've written a book titled *Reset: A Leader's Guide to Work in an Age of Upheaval*. Tell us about the book.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** It was truly one of those things I'm sitting at home, like all of us, March 2020. I remember the day, Friday the 13th, which was the day we all realized that the world was going to stop and that we were going to have to start working remotely for those of us who weren't before the pandemic. And I actually began writing a book and it wasn't called *Reset*. It was called *The Great Pause*. If you recall, all of our elected officials, state, federal, the CDC, everyone said, if we can just shut the country down for 14 days, 21 days, 30 days, we can get over this. We can stop the spread of this disease, put it to bed, and they will get back to normal. So, I decided, Whitney, to chronicle those 30 days. It was the first time in my life when I was able, I wasn't traveling. I have an 11-year-old daughter, so I could spend time with her, and we could binge-watch television shows. I mean, in some ways it was kind of weird. We were excited for the break because it was an unplanned 30-day hiatus. Well, after we got to day 45 and day 60, and day 90, it became clear to me. That my book wasn't going to be about a pause. It was going to be about a reset. Because the difference between pushing the pause button, if you can think about the metaphor, is when you push the button again, things pick up just where they left off. And I realized that a couple of things were happening as I chronicled the workplace, the worker mindset, things were going to forever be different. And so, if we were going to be successful coming out of this recovering, and if we're going to have a human-centered recovery, it was going to be necessary that we reset the way we thought about leadership.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And this wasn't just, by the way, an exercise for 60-year-old white men who grew up leading organizations the old way. It was applicable to a 40 something-year-old black guy. Because everything that you knew before March 13, 2020, was turned on its head. And I knew that when, and if we returned to the workplace, that the very definition of a workplace would be different. How the social contract that existed between employees and employers would be different. Think about it. Shortly afterwards, companies all over furloughed people laid them off, fired them. I mean, a lot happened in that 12-week period after March 13, 2020. And so I went on the journey of converting a book from the *Great Pause* to the *Great Reset*. And the idea was, think about, what, in what ways, the world of work would change going into the 2020, 2021, and beyond. And by the way, we all thought at that time, by 2021, we'd be over it.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yes, we did.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** People thought by 2022, we'd be over it. And here we are in 2022, still talking about some form of COVID and its variants, but that, that's really what prompted it as I want it to. There's this unique moment in time where think about never in our lifetimes, our parent's lifetimes. And unless you were around in 1918, never before have we had a global shutdown. Even in 9/11, things stopped in certain parts of the world, temporarily. But

they quickly resumed, albeit different, but. But quickly resumed. This was a sustained period where we all had an opportunity to reflect on what the future of work would be.

**Whitney Johnson:** You said you chronicled for 30 days. Do you have a little mini journal around that that you've kept?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** I did. I did. And it was an exercise because I was for the first time homeschooling my kid. Right. So as an exercise, both of us documented and chronicled day one, day two, what did we do? How much time? It was just I had to make it interesting. And so, yes, I did. And one thing that stood out, which was really interesting, is we, while, while there one of the things that we talked about is how is this remote work going to work? How is remote schooling going to occur? Because she had always been in person and how was daddy's work going to be done? How was it going to communicate with 310,000 members who are HR professionals who at that point, were being called on to do things they'd never done before by their businesses, their employers? We had to, you know we talk about first responders, and first responders are health care workers and firefighters, and police officers. We were corporate first responders.

**Whitney Johnson:** I love that.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Right. And so, everything from my spouse is now in the hospital on a ventilator. How do my benefits work? How does that affect me mentally and emotionally? We spoke to people constantly about their financial fears because their spouse lost their job. Now you're saying you might be married, but you're living on a single income, right? There were just so many things we as HR professionals were called upon to do. So, I chronicled in those earliest days, like, how's this all working? How are people actually getting things done?

**Whitney Johnson:** In your book, you say that 70% of employees value HR more than ever after the pandemic, and you've started to allude to that. But I would love to hear some story or anecdote? And I'm sure there are probably thousands, but something that comes to mind that brings that notion to life.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Where it showed up the most was around physical, and mental wellness. And a story that I'm, I'm reminded of, it's interesting takes us back to, harkens back to the beginning of this interview, the level of stress that our employees were enduring through the pandemic because of the unknowns, the anxiety was. Palpable. And so, we had an employee who called in and said to our HR function, I just need help. And we didn't know what it was about because we were having Zoom calls. We didn't lay off anyone. No one's pay was cut, so we didn't understand what was going on. This particular, I'm being very careful because I don't want to divulge anyone's confidences as a result of being home with her spouse became a victim of domestic violence. And she reached out to us, her employer, for help. And HR, that's we think about preserving lives and livelihoods. But this was both, right. And so we were she was sharing that. When you're having Zoom calls, you ever notice this person didn't turn on the camera? Because then we would have seen what was occurring to her, if not actively in the moment, what she looked like after such an altercation.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And HR we had to figure out how do we become the counselor of sorts? How do we help her think about how to exit this situation? How do you protect your children? It was just a multitude of factors, and it was at that moment that I realized that we, the HR of the past, we were sort of a necessary evil.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** You go to them to get information on your benefits, but it was very transactional and not particularly life changing. We were that group that went through that painful annual performance review process, those things like that. That's what people thought about a necessary evil. And what we saw during the pandemic is that employees for the first time looked at us as a true support function in a way that most of us have to admit we were never seen in the past, except in the rarest of circumstances. And so that situation comes to mind is we helped someone, and their child, by the way, who was observing this and living through this hell, find a way out. Pleased to say that it worked out well. The employee is come on the other side of that, is separated from the husband. But we played the role step by step as the consigliere, the confidant, the trusted advisor.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know what I love about what you just said is this is now the second time I've cried in the interview. There might be a third time. I love that description of support function. We use that term so loosely and so cavalierly. And in this moment, this was the life support function.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Literally.

**Whitney Johnson:** Very powerful.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Because it's easy to say, well, why don't you just call the police? But everything that flows from that, and the employee needed help in thinking about that, you can't call your parents, because first of all, you're admitting that your husband is not a good person. But you're also concerned about literally, she said, but what if he hurts them? You know, it was just it was a very, very complicated process to maneuver. And fortunately, she trusted her HR function and saw us as having a broader remit than just providing information around benefits and payroll and performance that we became a real support function to her.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, a quote that I read in the book that I'll share and you may want to comment on it, or it can just be a little grace note in the conversation is that the organizations thriving in this era are led by CHROs who exhibit a gift for reinvention.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Yes, it's been interesting too. You raise an issue that I wanted to raise, and I had to be so careful in raising it in this book. The successful profile for a CHRO - characteristics as well as style approach changed almost overnight with the pandemic. Right. So, here we were, is having to be open to reinventing everything. To challenging everything that you had built and that had made you successful as a professional. Right. That sometimes our biggest obstacle is success itself. If you've been successful and it's the thing that got you to the C-suite, why would you change you would build upon it, reinforce it. The pandemic forced us to identify CHROs who actually lived their guiding principles, the values of flexibility and agility, and openness. Right. It's easy to say those words, but needing to truly reinvent how work is done, who is a worker, how they are compensated. All of that requires a totally, totally, truly open mind. A lot of times when we used to use the term, do you have an open mind? We were kind of doing it in the diversity context, right? It's really more focused on that. But in terms of innovating and reinventing work, the future of work, the pandemic thrust us into it and those who were successful saw it as a gift.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr. :** They embraced it, saw it as a challenge. But there were several people who didn't, and they're struggling. If not, they've lost their jobs. I was looking at an article the other day and I know my stat won't be exactly right, but it was like we've seen 40% turnover in CHRO jobs since the pandemic and I guess someone asked me about it, some news journal or something. And I said some of it's because the CHRO said I didn't sign up for this kind of a job. This is heavy. I don't know if you saw the piece from New York Times the other day about HR is now the nurse. We're everything. And so, some of those folks are like, I just didn't sign up to do all of this. Right. The other side of it, though, and the more sobering side is CEOs, boards all said, you know, we need more of a CHRO and so you can't cut it. And that's really what's been uncomfortable is the involuntary turnover of CHROs, where the business decided that what we need and expect from a CHRO is now forever different.

**Whitney Johnson:** This is the moment for CHROs for sure. One of the things I think is interesting is that as the CEO of SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, you are in an interestingly unique position to comment on how a CEO and a CHRO work together.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Yes

**Whitney Johnson:** What does a great partnership look like?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** So, you know, this is a question that has plagued me for years because I've worked with CEOs as their CHRO, and I didn't exactly think it was great. It, it was okay, I describe it as the difference between back in the day we took employee satisfaction surveys versus now we take employee engagement surveys. It's that, that difference. Satisfying a CEO is pretty simple, right? If you're competent and you know, the fundamentals of, of operating and leading an HR function, you'll do fine. The engagement with the CEO is a very different level and the

most successful ones start with competency. And I call it the three C's because I'm a lawyer and we talk about everything in threes, but also because it's actually appropriate here. Number one is competency. You've got to be really good and you're constantly needing to learn. CEOs, who, are typically type A's, they're, they're competitive, and they want to win. You win by staying ahead of the game. So, competency is, is a big part of a very successful relationship. You need to be the expert that they turn to, just as if they have a finance question. They go to their expert CFO, where you've got to be the people and culture expert. That's a competency. The second C though is around their confidant. CEOs often say this, and I tell you, I live this. It's a lonely spot. You're being forced to make some really, really tough decisions often, and you don't have anyone to share it with. If you're a publicly traded company CEO and you tell the wrong person, it could result in insider trade. All sorts of things can go against you in this situation, competitive threats and so you don't have anyone to talk with.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And even if you have a spouse or partner, that person oftentimes doesn't understand what you're going through. So that CHRO becomes a real confidant to the CEO when you're dealing with ethical questions, not just the compliance legal questions, because the lawyers can give you that, but how and what do you do to manage a situation such that you're doing so in a very smart way. And smart is fully loaded with everything, however, you so defined smart. And then the last one is courageous. And especially now, given that I'm talking to you about on the *Disrupt Yourself* podcast, disruption requires courage, period, full stop. CEOs, As I said, I'm generalizing, but by nature are courageous. They're disruptive if they're going to stay in business very long, they are. And so having someone who understands that partners with you in that way, sort of on that journey, we're all geared up to do something. I think about some of my, I skydive and the first time I got ready to skydive, there's no way in the world I would have done it alone. But I had a friend with me who said, Yeah, let's go do it. And that's what CEOs need, is they need a CHRO with them who is as courageous and balancing them oft, often balancing them out. I should say oftentimes, that's where you get it. So, competency, a confidant relationship, and then courage. Those three things they really do as basic, and trite as it might sound to three C's. That's what I have found. Those three things, when done right, lead to an amazing, mutually beneficial, CHRO - CEO relationship.

**Whitney Johnson:** Let's talk about a time when you were a CHRO and you were engaging with the CEO is there and you may not want to disclose names, but you may. Do you have a time when you felt like, Oh yeah, we're in the groove. I am doing all those things, and we are just making things happen.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr. :** Yes, I do. And I'm glad to talk about it because it's so rare, and it's probably only happened really once in my career, but I was at Paramount. Paramount Pictures had a live entertainment division. We own theme parks, cruise ship entertainment, all sorts of things out of home, live entertainment for Viacom. And I worked with the CEO who recently retired her name, interestingly, talking about a leader ahead of her time, a woman CEO, Jane Cooper. And we literally, it was simpatico. And it wasn't that we always agreed. In fact, that's exactly when I had to draw on my courage, because there were times when she had a very, very strong opinion about something and didn't always fully appreciate my business perspective because after all, I was a lawyer and an HR guy. I was a back-office function guy. I wasn't a businessperson, but I felt totally confident, competent, and courageous enough to have those conversations with her. And we wouldn't, it wasn't about winning or losing. I won her over. It was about getting to the right decision. And so sometimes winning was her saying, you know, I'm going to I will go on a scale of 1 to 10 to the ten with you, but I'm going to go to a seven. And that incremental achievement, and sometimes it's pretty monumental because it started at two. Right? So, it was a really good thing. But that was it was so good that I'm going to say something that'll surprise you. I'd always had a desire to be a CEO because, again, no matter how great you were as a general counsel and how great you were as a CHRO, you still weren't the top dog, right? But when I was in that role, the relationship was so good that I was perfectly fine being in that role. I didn't aspire to do more. And it wasn't because Johnny was no longer ambitious. It was because I was truly feeling like I was adding value to the organization, and I was literally my highest value to the organization was in that role.

**Whitney Johnson:** What an interesting observation, Johnny, is that if you have a boss that is allowing you, if you go to self-determination theory to feel competent and autonomous and this relatedness to your boss and yourself. That for a moment in time, in my words, you are in the sweet spot of the S Curve, and you don't feel a need to move to a new role because it's just working. And so that to me is an interesting indicator to know that you're in the sweet spot of a role.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** That is so well, said I've used that phrase sweet spot, but not in the context in the way that you just used it. But it is so. It is very, I got to tell you, getting up and coming to work every day in. And this was when HR was not today.

**Whitney Johnson:** It wasn't fancy yet.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** It wasn't sexy by any stretch of the imagination. And I had any number of people saying, you left big, general counsel to go be the head of HR. Who does that like? Right. Did you fail as a lawyer or something? Right. Because smart people who are looking to advance don't go to HR from legal. But it was the most satisfaction that I've frankly ever gotten in my career. Even still now. I love what I do now, but it was just that sweet spot, as you appropriately describe it.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, for a CEO who is listening and looking to hire the right CHRO are the three important criteria someone who's competent, someone who can be a confidant, and who is courageous. What would you add to that?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** The only thing I would add to it, so yes, without question. And I think at the end of the day, the umbrella term is someone you trust. So, if they're really competent, then you trust their expertise. If they are your confidant, then you trust their judgment. And if they're courageous, then you trust that when you're in a tough position. And let me tell you, every CEO is often, when you have to make tough calls, where there's do, we require, mandate, vaccination or not? Do we bring people back to the office or not? There's no right or wrong there. You're relying on the courage of your HR expert to know and advise you. Those are those moments. So, the umbrella term is trust. And that's what I've said this to a couple of my counterparts as they've been looking for, CHROs. I said, you know, assume that all of the appropriate screening has been done so that by the time you see the two or three finalists that they're all, they can do the job. That's not the question. Or you, you have a whole different set of problems.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** If you're, if you're, if you're screening for technical expertise, by the time the person gets to you, problem. What you're really ultimately asking yourself is who do I trust the most out of these three finalists and the lens through which you should determine it or decide if you trust them or not are those three. Competency. Can I see this person as being my confidant? Can I? We jokingly refer to my CHRO in the past when it's been a woman, as my, my work wife. And if it's a guy, it's my work partner. Like we say those things because you really do sometimes share with them things that you don't even tell your spouse and can't. Depending upon the nature of the issue. HIPPA violations would suggest if something's going on at work, you can't go home and tell your spouse about something that's occurring with someone's health condition at work. So, they really do become that confidant. And as I said, courage is everything because you go out and you make a decision and sometimes, they're right and sometimes, not so much.

**Whitney Johnson:** Something interesting that you talk about in the book is, you call for greater rigor in hiring chief diversity officers, which I thought was such a great observation. What are two or three necessary criteria for that?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Let me tell you one, and I wonder if there are two or three, it might be just one competency.

**Whitney Johnson:** All right. So, what is competency as a diversity officer look like?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Yes. So, so and I always have to put things in a little context. So, I've been in this business for 20 or 30 years. I'd like to stick closer to 20, although it's much closer to 30. But one of the things that I and the reason I bring that up, is because, I was there when we were just talking D with diversity. And then a decade or so later came the equity conversation, and so, the E. D and E, and then we saw the I come around. Everyone's now talking inclusion. So, I've seen the evolution of the DEL, acronym and the work that's associated with it. What I will say to you is we made some, some really early mistakes in this work and it's like anything else. Version 1.0 is, is not as good as 2.0 is better than nothing. Right. So, this is not to be critical of diversity. But what I will say to you is I have found that many of the so-called diversity experts are really activists, and not that you can't be an activist and a diversity expert, but all too often they are not steeped in human behavior. They don't understand how human beings process change management. They don't have the patience to understand that many of the issues that we struggle

with from a diversity, equity, and inclusion standpoint weren't created overnight, and therefore they're not going to be resolved overnight. So, this requires a full understanding, not just a passion for the topic.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And that's the problem, right? You find people who are passionate about it, but they're not equipped to actually lead a strategically critical function initiative within an organization. And thus, I have CEOs and a CEO said this to me and I say this. I tell the story in some of my speeches. They say a guy called me up and he said, I'm tired. I'm frustrated. I'm annoyed with all of this diversity stuff. White male. And he said, And I know I can trust you and talk to you about it Johnny because you're going to, you're going to help me get this right in my head because I know it's the right thing to do. But I've got to be honest, I'm so tired of platitude-filled statements that my comms people write for me. I'm so tired of writing checks and giving them to the right organizations depending upon what's happening. Either it's time's up when we're having gender issues. It's Black Lives Matter, when it's race issues, it's like Asian hate, he said, I'm just, we're doing all of the right stuff, but we don't seem to be making any progress. I'm taking my wife out three or four times during the fall to black-tie dinners, and I'm sitting at the right places with the right community groups. Yet nothing is really changed. And, and I said to him. Tell me who has run your diversity efforts for you, and I can tell you why nothing has changed.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Each time you've hired very well-intended people who are very passionate about the topic, but they are not competent to design a successful diversity strategy for you. And he just looked at me. And I said, so, you ask yourself, and this is a fair question for some people who might be listening here and who might, you might be curling your toes right now because I'm stepping on someone's feet right now. But at the end of the day, would you hire the comparable person to be your CFO if they if you get my point, right? Yeah, absolutely. To be your CFO. But if that person had the same, do you apply the same level of rigor that you do in the selection process? Do you look for people who have evidenced a history of really making significant strategic diversity shifts and transformations within organizations? Or did you get someone who is passionate about it, who was successful as a lawyer or an HR person or something else, and you just put them in it and they, by the way, check the box. They were woman, they were black, they were Latina. You did the optic work. But if you continue to do that, then you shouldn't expect anything to change. It's that old definition of lunacy, right? Do the same thing. Expect a different result.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, there's one part of it where someone needs to understand what is diversity, and why does it matter, and what is equity, and what is inclusion. So, some basic competencies around what those are, definitionally, etc. But then there's the bigger question which goes back to and starts to look a little bit at our work as we build our work. The S-curve of learning, it's a personal S-curve, but it's on the diffusion curve of Roger's.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Yes.

**Whitney Johnson:** And so, what you're saying is you need a person who is an expert in how to help groups change. So, they need to have that competency around that topic. They also have to have the competency around change management. And only when you have those two together, plus the ability. Well, actually, this is, this is included those two together. You start to get someone who can actually do this, and it might not serve you to have an underrepresented group running that initiative.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Ooh, ooh, a taboo conversation that I'm glad to jump in with you. You want to disrupt? That's me. I was at Compass Group, which at the time, and it still might be the world's largest food services company based in the UK, FTSE 100 trader company. We have 408,000 employees at the time. And our first version of a chief diversity officer, we, we created an office of the Ombudsman, that's what we call it. And now, to be fair, not the most artful way to describe it. That's what it was in 1.0 back in the late nineties. And I dare to put a white male in the job. Oh, my God. The backlash I took at the time from the under-represented minority professionals within the organization and many in the broader community, that I was missing the point that part of this person's remit, in fact, a big part of their remit was the company's then diversity work. So, remember, there was no, and I that we were talking about at the time, and I mean, I took a beating. It was like nothing you've ever seen now. And ultimately, it was so cool to hear five, six, seven years later, this is where courage comes in.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** I said, this is the right person. They have just what you just described, the ability to influence and not through power, but through their own personal power and their ability to diffuse this. It was just everything



that you're saying. He had it, and he was quite successful, ultimately went on to become take on another role as general counsel of the company. So, it was right, you know, a business executive who had that "it".

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Right. And that's what you do. And when we get that right, you start to see major progress. And Compass, right now, I think just recently they received sort of all of the big diversity awards. And I take a lot of pride in knowing that I could have taken the obvious choice, a black woman in the law department, or a Latina in the HR department, I could have done that. But the person who had the ability and who was so steeped in human psychology was this guy.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And there you have it.

**Whitney Johnson:** It's very interesting. I'm just thinking back to Roger's diffusion curve early on. You've got your early adopters, but in order for something to diffuse throughout a system, you need influencers.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** That's right. And we have to be careful. One of the things I tried to talk about in the book, and it's a whole book in and of itself, by the way, on this diversity topic. Is the realization, and I say this a lot lately, we all thought diversity was the Holy Grail, that all of our problems would be solved once we were more diverse. And what we realized is that inclusion is the bigger challenge. How do you take it is very difficult to manage a diverse population, far more difficult than a group of people with the same experiences, same lived experiences, you know, perspectives, etc. So, with diversity comes complexity, right? And it requires really, really smart people to navigate a more complex workplace. So, you need smart people. Really smart people, right? Not just passionate and emotional people, but smart people, because you've got to convince other people that this is good. And what I've found is that our country is as diverse as it's ever been and at once as divided as it's ever been. And just none of us would have thought. Right. It's counterintuitive in some ways if you think about it. Right. Whitney?

**Whitney Johnson:** But we don't have the skill. What you're saying is that it's a whole new skill set that we need to develop, that we haven't had to develop. And so, we're we've got to figure it out.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Well, we focused on diversity and we didn't even begin to think about inclusion.

**Whitney Johnson:** Yeah.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** And that's, that's, that was what we learned from this. And, and listen, maybe it could be said that you needed to have diversity before you could have a conversation around inclusion because there was nothing to practice if you didn't have diversity. So, I get all of the, for anyone listening who's mentally challenging me right now, I got you. I'm not saying that, that it was bad. I actually think this evolution was appropriate and it was the way that we have arrived at the E and I and they'll likely be some other. We will continue to evolve dynamically about this. But what I will say before we leave this question is, I believe and this is pretty strong of a statement for me to make, this is game changing for us. It presents an existential threat to the workplace. This idea that we don't figure out how to make real progress when it comes to I, E, and D and I lead with inclusion and then I say equity and diversity because the workplace is becoming. I mean, if you look at K through 12 schools in America right now, public schools, they're majority-minority. So, your diversity is coming no matter what you think. You know, you don't have to say it at the world. The country will be more diverse. The question is, how do we get the most out of that diversity? Because diversity for the sake of diversity doesn't necessarily solve any problem. But if you can get the get everything good out of diversity and there's a ton of it from diverse perspectives, everything when we can figure that out, companies that do it well are going to unleash their innovation. They're going to unleash their competitiveness. And the ones that don't will languish.

**Whitney Johnson:** The images coming to my mind is that you open up a door and you now have 30 people in a room that are all very different. So, you've accomplished the diversity piece. The inclusion piece is well, are any of us talking to each other?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Exactly.

**Whitney Johnson:** How do we speak the same language? And so that, like you said, it's a much more complex challenge. If there were one workplace policy, you could wave a magic wand and change. What would it be? Because you listed a lot of policies in your book. But if there's is there one that you would say is the keystone species, workplace policy.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Paid leave, is on several levels. So, when you break down paid leave, so sick leave, you think about where we are at the pandemic. We had people who were having to make the decision. They wake up in the morning, they're right on the margin, right? Ten bucks an hour, barely keeping a roof over their kid's heads and food on the table. And they said, I'm sick, my kid's sick. I could stay home, but then I'm going to forgo a day of pay. And so, they made a choice to come to work. And then they infected their colleagues. Those colleagues took it home and infected vulnerable children, elderly parents. The lack of paid leave, specifically sick leave, has really is, is so problematic for us when we measure, and we have all of the data that talks about how much money we lose. Employers lose every year because of people getting sick from other sick people who had they stayed home. Even if we had to pay them, we could have saved money by paying people to stay home who were sick. It's just amazing. So sick leave is one of those areas that I think is a real challenge for us, and it disproportionately impacts the poor and women who are largely caregivers, not exclusively, but largely. And then on the other side of it is when we parse out a week of vacation, paid vacation. So, you work 51 weeks a year, oftentimes 50 to 60 hours a week because it's just intense. All of us have found a way to now become exempt magically. So, no one's getting overtime. But you work overtime and we're burning people out. We're burning them out. So, we've got to get to the point where employers realize that leave and paying people for leave is not an expense. It's actually good. It's, it's an.

**Whitney Johnson:** Investment.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** It's, it, it's, it's an investment. It's a positive expense if there's such a thing. Right? And so that's that to me. If I could wave that magic wand, you think about the fact that we know all of the data tells us that if a woman after delivering birth can stay home for some period of time, not have to decide, do I rush back to work to keep money coming in the door? But can I have paid maternity leave? That, that is good for not just that woman and her child, but it's good for society because the better this child's first several months on this earth, the more confident they feel, the more protected and, and secure they are. Ultimately, that's our future worker. So, it benefits society at large for that kid to get off with, with a great start. So paid leave. I know. I feel like I'm so passionate about this. If you can't tell if I had to pick and I hate superlatives like what's the most important issue? But paid leave is the policy that I would spend most of my time on.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Johnny, has SHRM studied the four-day workweek at all?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Well, ad nauseum. We were studying it before the pandemic, by the way, because as much as people think this is a new concept, other parts of the world have played with it and toyed with it. And what do we mean by a four-day workweek? Is it four ten-hour days? Is it four days in the office and an 8 hours in the office for four days and then 8 hours at home on the fifth day? Like, what does that mean? So, it shows up in a lot of different ways. We're in the middle of studying it. The headline, and let me tell you again, we don't have all of our research around it because the pandemic has really changed the outcomes. A lot of what we thought has not manifested itself. Our hypothesis turned into a null hypothesis real quickly. But what we're learning is that employees don't want formulas at all. They want flexibility. And flexibility might be three 12-hour days. For some people, it might be 4 hours. Go home and do things for 2 hours and then come back another 4 hours in the evening. So, you make up an eight-hour day, but in a 12-hour period, there are all sorts of iterations and versions of what is working. And so, my fear is that and this is what we're hearing is that you run out and say, oh, we're now going to go to a four-day workweek. Well, that's not any significantly different than a five-day. It's arbitrary. What employees are telling us they want is flexibility. Tell people what work you need to get done and then figure out how to incorporate, integrate their work and their lives. That's the 21st century way. Yeah, but this whole formulaic. So now you're going to be in the office 10 hours a day, times four days. Well, what is that all about? It's lazy HR.

**Whitney Johnson:** That's what's interesting. You've heard me allude a few times to the S-curve of learning as this simple visual model of the emotional arc of growth. So, we have the diffusion curve. How groups change. In my language, it's, it's how individuals change. So, you've got the launch point, the sweet spot, and mastery. When you think about your work, where are you currently on the S curve? Are you in the launch point? Are you in the sweet spot? Are you in mastery?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** So, to be fair, I'd have to separate out what part of my work. You can imagine, in this job, there's whole, think: there's diversity, equity, inclusion, there's upskilling and reskilling, and there are different parts. But overall, when I think about work, all things work, which is what SHRM is endeavoring to deliver on as a remit. We're launch, and I tell you why. I thought we were in the middle and then the pandemic happened. And by definition, if there was a reset moment, then everything that we had been very close to mastering was thrown out the window. So, I know that was a trick question by you as well.

**Whitney Johnson:** You know what?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** If you mastered it, then how'd you do it in two years?

**Whitney Johnson:** Actually, I don't. So, here's what I would say. My guess is that for you personally, you're in the sweet spot because you had, you came to this, this opportunity with all tremendous domain expertise. As a lawyer, as a CHRO, pandemic, you might have been approaching mastery, but the pandemic gave you huge doses of launch point, which puts everything that you're doing and this place of being in the sweet spot. Where it's definitely hard, but it's not too hard and it's definitely not too easy. So, you're, you're optimizing the tension of what you're doing. That's, that's my diagnosis.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** So, let me take a quick chat. I would agree with you with one caveat.

**Whitney Johnson:** Please, that was very lawyerly of, you know.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** The mindset of the employee. The 2021-22 employee is like nothing we've ever seen before. And it's, think about the great resignation. And I got to tell you, I don't think this is episodic. I don't think this is just something that's going to go away in a year or two. It is just different. People's relationship with work is just fundamentally changed forever. And so, every bit of us we talk about reset. Even in that sweet spot, I am second-guessing everything that we even thought we understood two years ago. So, I think you're right. It's in my sweet spot because I have enough experience to see the trend, and to be able to sort of plot it out a little bit. I know where that hurricane appears to go. You know, I'm a Floridian. So, when you talk about hurricanes and we plotting it on vectors and all of that, that's what comes to mind. But I would just say, in something that I've never seen and broadly. The employee is very different than the employee that I've seen in the last 30 years. They really are. And it's more than just millennial labels or Generation Z labels. They are fundamentally different. And their relationship, the employer-employee social contract is just changed.

**Whitney Johnson:** So, Johnny, what was useful to you in this conversation? So, it might be something that you said. It could be something I said. Probably not. It's most likely something that you thought some dots that you connected in the course of this conversation. What was that?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Taking us all the way back to the beginning of the conversation. And I really mean this. You made me, when you use the phrase and I hope I get it right, but it was a gift. Hmm. That situation where my former colleague committed suicide after being separated from Blockbuster. I've had a lot of time. That was 20 plus years ago to think about what came of that and how I said it's changed me, in that pivotal point in my leadership growth. But I never I have to admit, I never maybe I just I wouldn't allow myself to say that there was a gift in that and a gift to other employees. So that was really a big learning for me. And I want to thank you for that because it really that was that's deep. I'll be thinking about that late tonight.

**Whitney Johnson:** Mm hmm. Any final thoughts?

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** The most important thing that I hope your listeners are taking from this, whether they're in HR, or whether there are other types of business leaders, CEOs of the C-suite execs is. We haven't talked a lot about culture, that word that used to be a soft word. But I've got to tell you, if you don't figure that out, whatever your culture is, your business is really, really, really going to struggle. Employees now are demanding it. I've never, ever seen anything like it. I just completed interviewing interviews for a candidate for a role here and every candidate at the end when they say, do you have any questions for me? Every question every candidate has said, describe your culture. And I mean, not just the vision and the value statements that are on the walls and the lobby, but like describe it, describe behaviors that are rewarded or punished, for lack of a better term, for this. And so, I got to tell you, if, if you aren't having real serious conversations, honest, introspective conversations around what your, your culture is. Your organization's culture is, and reaching some point of cultural clarity, then you can't, and I don't believe you'll ever be successful. And finally, to that point, I don't know that there are good or bad cultures. Now, clearly, save for illegal, immoral, unethical. Put that up. I'm saying. But overall, what works in your organization and what works in another organization will, it'll depend, right? But you've got to get some clarity around it as a leader, or you, I don't see how you can be successful executing a successful business strategy.

**Whitney Johnson:** Johnny Taylor, thank you for joining us.

**Johnny C. Taylor, Jr.:** Thank you. I very much enjoyed it. Thank you.

---

Here are two huge takeaways from my conversation with Johnny. Number one, work is different now. The way we relate to work and companies has changed. This evolution was a long time coming, but as Johnny explained, it's been accelerated by the pandemic. This is the moment for HR professionals. They are the emotional first responders in an emotionally uncertain time, and many are bowing out because, as Johnny says, they didn't sign up for this. Choosing your HR pros and HR executives is more important than ever. Which leads me to the second key takeaway.

Number two, find that work partnership. I love the three C's competency, confidence, and courage. Johnny talked about it in the context of a CEO and CHRO working together. If they want to succeed in moving a company forward, they need to feel psychologically safe with each other. They must be able to share things that only they can understand and have the courage to be disruptive. Obviously, this doesn't just apply at the C-suite level. Find your work partner early and often.

If you want an example of a manager who learns to treat his people more compassionately, listen to Howard Morgan, [Episode 247](#). For more on work-life fit, listen to Cali Yost, [Episode 155](#). For more on Reimagining the Workplace, listen to Pim de Morree, [Episode 181](#). And for someone who gets HR, listen to the episode with Leena Nair, former CHRO of Unilever, [Episode 235](#). Thank you again to Johnny C. Taylor for joining us. Thank you for listening. Thank you to our producer, Matt Silverman, audio engineer and editor Whitney Jobe, and production assistant Cassidy Simpson.

I'm Whitney Johnson

And this is Disrupt Yourself.