



**Recorded Message:** The Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners, a free-flowing conversation with leaders in the HR community, talking about themselves, the industry and their work. Brought to you in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association.

**Dave Hennessy:** Welcome to the Hennessy Report. I'm your host, Dave Hennessy. We have a great discussion for you today with the Senior Vice President and the head of corporate HR at CVS, also known as CVS Health. A lot of people don't know that CVS is number seven on the Fortune 500 list. If this merger acquisition of Aetna goes through, they will move all the way up to number three on the Fortune 500 list. Yes, that little pharmacy/convenience store that all of us New Englanders grew up going to is now big time.

Speaking of mergers and acquisitions, Mark has a lot of experience in this area. He was at Fleet when they acquired BankBoston and was very involved in that integration, as well as the acquiree when Fleet was purchased by Bank of America. His M&A experience is something we talk about early in the podcast. It really sharpened his focus on building sustainable corporate culture and how to look after employees and invest in their development.

Like former podcast guests, Helen Drinan and Marilyn Hausammann, he really encourages HR professionals to get well-rounded business experience and to volunteer for projects in organizations.

Up next on the podcast, we have the Chief People Officer of HubSpot, Katie Burke. That'll be out in a few weeks. Now I bring you my discussion with Mark Griffin.

Well, here we are at the corporate headquarters of CVS, I think formerly known as CVS Health. Is that true, Mark?

**Mark Griffin:** Yes, it is.

**Dave:** Sitting right here with Mark Griffin, the Senior Vice President of Corporate Human Resources. Glad to have you on the podcast.

**Mark:** It's great to be here. Thanks, David.

**Dave:** Before we get into HR topics, I think it would be great if the listeners, we all could hear a little bit about your background and how you got into the function first of all. And more importantly, what are some of the experiences in your life, maybe people and experiences that helped shape who you are and helped you get to where you are in your career today.

**Mark:** Yeah, thanks David. So in college, I was an industrial psychology major and a little bit not sure why I wanted to do that. I took some business courses and was very interested in the nonclinical side of psychology, but the business side of it. Ended up entering a co-op program where I spent time through an internship at a hospital in their HR department. That led to a part-time job in between classes, and it gave me some experience outside of just classwork when I graduated to launch me into my initial phases of an HR role.



From there, I was at Fleet Bank. From there, I just signed up for as many opportunities as I possibly could. Stretched my ability to take on more, to learn. I was a sponge. I think you have to take a lot of risks when you enter into the HR, and a lot of fields, when you're new out of college. I did that and I grew through Fleet. I think a big experience there was that you have to move quickly. We were doing a lot of acquisitions.

**Dave:** That was very popular back in that time.

**Mark:** Yes.

**Dave:** Not so much now, but it was quite a stretch there for about 25 years of banking acquisition it seemed.

**Mark:** It was. That, David, I think was a key experience for me is I also led some of those acquisitions as a key team member on the integration team. You really learn a variety of HR skills during an integration. You've got to do talent assessment. You have to do talent management. You've got culture work. You've got engagement work. You have outplacement work. You've got coaching and development work. You have org design work that you have to do. I think that was a key experience in my growth was really through a variety of different mergers and acquisitions.

**Dave:** One that comes to mind is the BankBoston acquisition. Certainly very important to a lot of our listening audience. Do you want to talk a little about that, that experience? Cause you were acquiring quite a strong organization in their own right. They had a strong HR culture as I know.

**Mark:** They had a really strong culture. I think the cultures of both companies were different like it happens in many acquisitions. Unlike prior acquisitions where Fleet would acquire a company, work through the integration and quickly integrate the prior company into processes and administrative areas. Bank of Boston was more of a collaborative integration. We blended cultures versus just pull people into the Fleet culture. That was the single biggest difference in that acquisition versus others. They also had an international business line.

**Dave:** That's right. They had South America, I believe, right.

**Mark:** Right, yup. That gave us a big step internationally, which was new to the company. There was a lot of work going on there to really get the best talent who could lead the new company. We had a lot of work to do. We were based in downtown Boston. I think ultimately the company was a lot better by merging both cultures together and getting the best of both.

**Dave:** What are you proudest of about that merger, about your work on it or your team, I guess.

**Mark:** I think it's the way we ultimately treated people through the integration. I mean, any time you're in HR through a major acquisition, there are people that will lose their jobs. We found a way to actually make sure that was fair, consistent. We treated people with respect. We communicated very, very well. I had a lot of people, even though they may not have ended up in the new company with a role, were



very pleased the way the process went, and felt that they were treated fairly and treated with a lot of respect.

**Dave:** And I think the market saw that as well. I think that was certainly common thoughts after that.

**Mark:** Then the last thing, David, is just that we did turn the new company into a company that was going to continue to grow much farther than both of the companies could on their own. That was exciting. That we actually created, through a lot of hard work, cross functional hard work with all different kinds of departments, a new entity. A new entity that could serve customers better than before and that was going to continue to grow the company, which is now Bank of America.

**Dave:** Of course, I was going to mention that, too. Then you have the other side of being the acquired. That was more from... It sounds like more of a merger than an acquisition, but it was an acquisition and then acquired certainly by Bank of America.

But one last thing about the merger, anything that you learned about that, that you would share to others in the HR merger and acquisition space that you would recommend as advice if they're involved, just like you were, in that process? Something as you play back like, "I would have done this differently," or, "I just learned that this has to be done this way," or, "I'd recommend others to do it that way."

**Mark:** Well, coming off prior acquisitions, we had a methodology on how to do this. It was easy for me to be tapped as a key person to lead the integration with a few of my peers from both sides of both companies.

But I would say the key thing is to raise your hand and get involved. It's very easy to be... Especially with two big companies, to keep your head down, stay in the shadows and back off and let the chips fall. But you learn so much when you step up and you put anxieties behind you about what the new company is going to be and how change is going to affect you. You think about the company first. Things tend to fall into place.

I would encourage people who have an opportunity to join an integration team to take that leap because it's going to be a great experience, going to be very hard work, but it's going to be very, very rewarding. If you don't raise your hand, you may not have the opportunity.

**Dave:** That's good advice. What about the emotions with that? Because sometimes people have identities with the organizations that they've been part of for so long. I imagine you must have seen this, a lot of emotions around the BankBoston brand and culture leaving, or even the Fleet, what it was. Because now it's going to become something new. Was that part of it, part of the integration? Or, I'm sure it was, I guess. But how did you deal with it, I guess, all those emotions that people are having, or even you?

**Mark:** There were a lot. As I mentioned, both cultures were much different. Everybody had an opinion, "Why are they doing something this way? Why is Fleet doing something this way?" So yeah, those emotions run high.



I think there's two things. One is to get the best and brightest people from both companies who are also change agents and well respected on the integration team, so they could lead change and bring people with them.

The other thing is to embrace not what necessarily both prior companies do or did, but really get everybody aligned on where we're going. Then people start to feel better about, "Okay, well we may not be doing what we did before and that's okay because what we're going to do in the future is going to be better. It's going to be improved. It's going to be more efficient. It's going to serve our customers better." Instead of feeling bad about what's not carrying forward in the new company, feel good about what the new company is going to be.

**Dave:** So the new vision sounds like.

**Mark:** Correct.

**Dave:** That helps everybody get aligned.

**Mark:** A lot of communication, engagement, pulse surveys, pulse checks, town halls, a lot of communication in terms of...

**Dave:** Two-way communication, right.

**Mark:** That's right.

**Dave:** Yeah, that's great. Maybe shifting to HR a little bit. What are the biggest changes you've seen in the HR function over the last say 10 years?

**Mark:** I think HR really becoming a true business partner and not just doing HR programs for HR's sake. I think that... If that's the thought process or if that's what HR departments are doing today, they just don't get that seat at the table the way they used to. Over the past 10 years, I've seen that increasingly increase in nature in terms of...

**Dave:** Getting more control of helping....

**Mark:** Yeah, and have a voice...

**Dave:** ...be a business partner in strategy.

**Mark:** Right, and you're not just being brought in for HR topics, but being at the table for strategic business growth topics and "Oh, by the way, how are we going to do that from a human capital standpoint?" That's really, really critical.

I also think technology is changing a lot of things in the industry. But it also is changing HR. I think we have the ability to... From mobile and digital, we have a different way of engaging people and



communicating with folks. I think that HR departments have to really identify ways to capitalize on that, and also improve the expectations of employees on what the company should provide to them through HR comp benefits and other types of programs continues to increase. To keep people engaged and feel valued, we have to treat our employees the same way we treat our clients, and our customers and our patients. To do that, we need the infrastructure, we need the technology, but we also a dedication to really make the employee experience the best experience.

**Dave:** Going forward, what do you see some changes in HR as you go forward in the next five or 10 years? What are some of the things you hope to see or want to implement?

**Mark:** Yeah, so one that's in the marketplace now... As, David, I know you know. You've talked to people about this... is the whole performance management function. Do you continue with performance ratings? How do you think about that? I think that's something that a few companies have established already. They're testing it. I still think even though some companies have done it for a couple years, they're still, "How is this going to impact the long-term performance in terms of business results?"

It's a great idea because it improves the quality of the conversations versus just a numerical rating or an alpha rating. But that requires a lot of education for leaders. They need to know how to effectively communicate performance without having a "grade" assigned to it. That training has to take place in order for this to be effective.

That's a key piece I think that is going to continue to evolve. I also think that the war for talent will continue to increase with the aging population, and with how millennials feel about the workplace. It's going to be clearly a war for talent in terms of who can get the best and the brightest folks.

I also think that what's going to change is you're not going to be necessarily recruiting for experience, a person who's done that role for years. You're going to start to recruit for capabilities, core capabilities, where people are going to start to learn the job. But I have the innate skills. I could lead people. I could effectively work across a matrix environment. I could influence people. I have a strategic thought process and acumen. I can solve complex problems.

That type of call it an "athlete" is what is going to start to be hired a lot more in the future than what has happened in the past. Yes, we'll still hire people with 10-20 years of experience, but that capability may start to trump experience.

**Dave:** Not looking for people that just did the same job somewhere else. Do they have the skills we need in our organization in a particular area?

**Mark:** That's right.

**Dave:** That's a different approach.

**Mark:** I think that assessing jobs and competencies that are needed in those jobs is the first thing to do. Then identifying people both within the company and outside of the organization that has those



capabilities. In the first three months, they'll get the job, they'll learn it. Plus there's a lot of smart people around them that have already done the job for many years.

I think you're going to see that trend around how we identify, test for and assess for capabilities and competencies that match what the real profile of the job needs. It may take that person a year to really get going in the groove of the actual work, but if they have those core competencies to lead, then will take it in a much higher direction than what may have happened prior.

**Dave:** You mentioned millennials a moment ago. What's your philosophy with engaging millennials?

**Mark:** I think you've got to be flexible and open to hearing what is important to them. I think just going through the same recruiting process when they're candidates isn't going to work. They're going to want speed of entry into your applicant system. They're going to want to get quick notifications. They're going to want to use mobile. They're going to be a bit impatient to hear what's going on about a job application 'cause they probably have many applications out there.

As employees, I think it's a lot of mentoring we see going on. They want to grow in their career. They want to network with folks. They want to share experiences. It seems to be a much more collaborative population in terms of, "We want to learn as a team. We want to grow. I want to experience new things." It's a group that I think we continue to need to listen to and adapt our internal processes.

**Dave:** Not just focusing on millennials. How do you approach career development in general, maybe inside CVS?

**Mark:** I think a big way for people to develop... and we use this within CVS Health quite a bit... is job experiences by moving people into different jobs. Maybe not roles that, again, they have done before, but they have that core competency.

Development programs are critical as well. We do a lot of programs outside and inside. I think those programs are key, but they have to be coupled with some real job experience where you can apply what you learned. If you just learn through development programs on how to lead better or how to influence better, but you don't have that application where you can practice it, try it, get feedback, that's critical.

The other piece of it, as I just mentioned, is feedback. A way to develop the quickest is to get constant feedback and have a development plan. If you don't have a development plan that your leader knows about, he or she can't give you feedback on that plan. Then making sure the leader's comfortable and trained about giving that on the spot real time feedback so people can learn and develop.

The experience around projects and initiatives, we tend to put our best and brightest on our key initiatives. That gives them a great opportunity to experience different things about either different parts of our company or either industry trends outside the company. It just opens up to a much broader viewpoint and from a development standpoint.



**Dave:** You've given us a window into your approach to leadership development it sounds like. Maybe a little bit about the culture, can you talk about the leadership culture there?

**Mark:** Yeah, so that's a great question. As we think about that, we really view that from an enterprise standpoint. We want to build leaders that have enterprise capabilities. I mentioned a few of our business units. But in order to be really effective and the most effective in the marketplace and deliver what our clients and customers and patients need, we have to integrate all of those and create products and service offerings that are integrated. In order to do that, you need leaders that understand all the different lines of business, not just one piece of it.

Cross-pollinating talent is very important. From a culture standpoint, we put a focus on that in terms of concentrating on our high potentials and understanding what parts of the business, the total enterprise, have they not experienced? Then rotating through that. So after a few years, they have truly built what we call enterprise experience. Then they're much more knowledgeable around product development opportunities or other kinds of strategic opportunities.

**Dave:** They can be better contributors to the leadership team.

**Mark:** Absolutely.

**Dave:** Well, this is... We're coming to the point in the podcast, you know where we do this at Keystone in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association. We have the NEHRA question of the podcast, which has always been for somebody up and coming in the HR function, somebody that's practicing now, but maybe aspires to a role like yours someday. What advice would you give that up and coming HR leader?

**Mark:** The advice that I would give them would be to concentrate on the business you're in first. Be a business leader. Understand the business. Apply HR to the business versus the other way around. I think a strong HR person that will continue to grow up through an organization and continue to develop and take on bigger and broader roles, are going to do that because they are concentrating on integrating HR delivery with what the business truly needs.

So I think learning the business is really, really key. You can't, as you get more senior, you can't be a real good HR person unless you really know the business that you're applying that to.

**Dave:** How would you recommend people learn the business? What steps would you recommend them take?

**Mark:** Spend time in the business with front line leaders. Get out there. Talk to folks. Talk to employees. Beyond business leader calls, be part of the staff meetings and even the strategic discussions that may not have HR as part of that. You're learning the business.

**Dave:** Insert yourself.



**Mark:** Absolutely. Be aggressive on that. If you're not invited to a meeting you need to be at to learn the business and then step back and say, "Okay, well how can I help from an HR standpoint?" You need to be assertive in terms of getting on there. Once you do that though, you have an obligation to actually bring HR solutions to the table that impact and benefit...

**Dave:** So you can't just show up.

**Mark:** You can't just show up. That's the deliverable that you sign up for. But that's what gets you noticed, that's how you add the impact to it.

I think the other thing is, I've seen a lot of HR people in my career that have great ideas but can't really execute those ideas for a variety of different reasons. A lot of HR programs...

**Dave:** Name one. What's one reason people can't execute?

**Mark:** They don't know who to collaborate with to get it done.

**Dave:** The political side as well, yeah.

**Mark:** I mean, especially...

**Dave:** Not a great word, but yeah.

**Mark:** That's right, David especially in a matrix company or organization, you really to understand who are the players that can get it done. I also think that it's baked into your strategy where you can't just think about the idea and developing the idea and the program without spending a lot of time thinking about the implementation and execution part of it. I've seen a lot of great programs die on the vine because they just can't be executed.

When I spend time interviewing HR folks, that's one thing I look for is not just what kind of ideas do you have and what kind of programs have you developed, but what have you implemented, what have you executed?

**Dave:** How, right, yeah right.

**Mark:** And, what were the results of that?

**Dave:** A different question for you, if you could write a letter of career or leadership advice to your 30-year-old self, what advice would you write to Mark Griffin, 30 years old?

**Mark:** I would write, "Get involved in more parts of HR as quickly as possible," especially with a large company. If you're in a smaller company, you can't help but do a little bit of everything. But in large companies, they tend to be more siloed and specialized, so you're narrow and deep versus broad and wide. You can get stuck in one domain for a period of time.





I've been very careful not to do that. I feel good that I had a broad range of experiences. But there were times in my career where I'm back to doing some part of HR that I've already done before. While that's fine, you don't want to stay there too long. Because what happens is, is you get to a certain level in the company where it's difficult to then move to other parts of HR because you've already gained an SME expertise in one area.

Now, if you want to be a compensation expert, fine. Stay in compensation. But if you want to be a broad-based HR person or even a chief HR officer at some point, you really want to make sure that you invest the time of moving laterally across HR. Don't worry about promotions. Move laterally to gain as much experience in a variety of different areas.

Even if you're in an HR business partner role, think about compensation. Think about benefits. Get involved in that. Know the details. Don't just think that, "Hey, don't worry. I could call a comp expert in." While you might be able to, the development is there for you to really understand.

**Dave:** Who have been some key influencers on you in your career, people that you've interacted with over the years, that have really made a difference in your philosophy or approach?

**Mark:** This might be different, but I'll start with my parents. Both were high school teachers. Both stressed accountability. We wouldn't get the benefit of the doubt if we screwed up in school at all because they were teachers.

**Dave:** They knew there was plenty of opportunities for extra credit, or more preparation, or...

**Mark:** Yeah. Even though they might have thought on rare occasions that we had some merit to our complaint, it was all about take the accountability and figure it out and you own it. That ownership is key. What I tried to do is work as hard as I possibly could to prove myself and to continue to show that ownership and accountability. I think that was a key lesson. They weren't even in business. They were high school teachers. But I always remember that. That has always been with me.

I think the other thing is I had a boss who was very strong at the strategy part of HR in terms of connecting dots of how things impact the total company. I think at times when you're trying to implement something quickly or solve a problem, you tend to think about, "How does this affect what you're dealing with," and not step back and say, "Okay, is this going to impact that department over there or this function or is it going to have a negative impact here? Do we have to tell another department like Communications to inform them what we're doing?" Really think about things in a holistic view. Think about all the different impacts that may happen from the work you're doing.

As I continue to grow in my career, that's been a requirement and also a staple of a senior HR person is you have to think about anything you do in HR, what are the implications in other areas and how are you going to address them? I thought that was something that she did extremely well and I modeled myself on that.

**Dave:** She was in HR as well?



**Mark:** That's correct.

**Dave:** Sometimes HR is in the very difficult position of balancing being part of the executive team, but also being the confidant to the CEO and that's a delicate balance. Maybe I think that's something that senior people that are listening might love to hear is your perspective on how do you balance those, that tricky position you're in?

**Mark:** Yeah, so obviously, you learn a lot of confidential information about the business, about people and about even the direct reports of the chief executive or the president of a major business line. Then you have those folks coming to you for help. How do they develop and how do they deal effectively with that president or chief executive officer? It is a balance.

I tend to think of it as a coaching opportunity, where I apply coaching to folks that we may know what they may need from a CEO's standpoint, how the CEO feels about that person or the president. But you turn that into a coaching opportunity. When we turn that into a coaching opportunity, you're not disclosing anything inappropriate, but you're really helping guide and coach and develop that next level down leader that next direct report to be as effective as they possibly can.

I also think that top executives, business line executives, know that there is a confidentiality requirement that HR has and they respect that. But I think if you can also put that aside and help people with their problems and help them work more effectively and with their peers or their top executive, I think you build a lot of credibility with them. Then they trust you. If you can't build trust as a senior HR executive, you really are not going to be as effective as you need to be.

**Dave:** Now we have a couple silly questions for you to wrap up our podcast. What gives you energy, Mark?

**Mark:** I think it's the interaction with people that bring different points of view. Sometimes it's a "argument" we have. Sometimes it's we agree to disagree. But I think that energy is there because it's a lively thought provoking discussion. I like people who can challenge the status quo and can think about things differently, and can push back and have those, "I disagree with you because here's why." Have those good discussions versus, "Here's the plan. Let's follow the rule book." That doesn't give me energy. But what does is kind of, "Let's solve a problem. Let's get the smartest people in the room and let's debate it. Let's have a good discussion about it."

Getting everybody's input including people that might be more junior, but might be closer to the problem. Hearing them come up with ideas that are much better sometimes than what we're all thinking about at a more senior level is really energizing.

**Dave:** Mark, the last question of the podcast, what's the first thing you do when you get out of bed in the morning?

**Mark:** Well, that depends on the morning probably, but I exercise. Not every morning, okay. I feel that it's good to get up and to do something and to get moving. I tend to think a lot when I'm exercising.



Then I end up coming to work when you have to start to jump right into that execution mode. For some reason, it just gives me the ability that I don't have enough time during the day is to think about the things that might be around the corner. Think about the things that we still have to do that may not have done well enough or need to do more of. Or, like what's the next priority in the business lines that I lead?

Then I had a boss back in Fleet that really talked about the business athlete. She used that as kind of wellness, like we talked about before. But you need to stay in shape both in your mind and in your body. She was talking about you have to eat right and stay healthy because if you're this corporate athlete concept, if you're not fit and if you're not eating right, then you're going to feel sluggish. You're not going to be as sharp in the business world. It really makes sense. When I don't exercise and don't eat right and don't get enough sleep, I am not my best.

When you're in a tough job, you need to make sure that you have the physical and mental stamina and preparation for it because even though we're not out there lifting weights here at work, you do go home mentally drained. I think that exercise both in mind and body, I think is something that is really important to keeping a good balance between how you perform at work.

**Dave:** Yeah, so it's really a holistic approach. Wraps up our whole conversation about wellness, too. Ties it all in.

**Mark:** It does, yeah. I didn't mean to tie it into wellness, but as you think about it, it really does.

**Dave:** Thank you so much, Mark, for being on the podcast.

**Mark:** Thanks, David, I really appreciate the offer. Thank you.

**Recorded Message:** Thank you for listening to the Hennessy Report from Keystone Partners. Be sure to subscribe to listen to all of our conversations with leaders in HR. Go to [keystonepartners.com](http://keystonepartners.com) and click on the podcast button.

The information, opinions, and content presented in this podcast are for general information only.

Views, thoughts, and opinions expressed in the podcast belong solely to the speaker, and not necessarily to the speaker's employer, organization, committee or other group or individual.

Keystone Partners assumes no responsibility or liability for any errors or omissions in the content of this transcription. The information contained herein is provided on an "as is" basis with no guarantees of completeness, accuracy, usefulness or timeliness.

© Keystone Partners and The Hennessy Report. 2018. All Rights Reserved.

All other trade names or company names referenced herein are used for identification purposes only and are the property of their respective owners.