

**2019**

# **HR@MOORE**

Survey of Chief HR Officers

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## **THE CHRO AND CULTURE:**

Results of the 2019 HR@Moore Survey of Chief HR Officers



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Executive Succession**

Darla Moore School of Business

Many thanks to the Center for Executive Succession partner CHROs for their support of our research

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Given the rash of scandals (Wells Fargo, Uber, etc.) that cast negative light on culture and the recent positive emphasis (e.g., Larry Fink's letters to BlackRock shareholders), part of the 2019 HR@Moore Survey of examined CHRO perceptions of how the board of directors (BOD) and CEO view culture. This report presents these results.

Quantitative results from the CHRO survey indicate that knowledge of culture and its impact on organizational outcomes is highest for CHROs, followed by CEOs and board members. All three groups recognize that culture has a strong impact on engaging and retaining employees, driving performance, branding the organization, aligning organizational members, implementing strategic initiatives, and avoiding enterprise risks. The major difference among these three groups is that CHROs perceive that board members believe leveraging culture to avoid enterprise risks is its second most important effect, whereas CHROs and CEOs were perceived to rate this benefit least important.

Qualitative results indicate that CHROs help the Board of Directors with understanding the organization's culture largely by sharing data and metrics through presentations. In contrast, CHROs tend to help CEOs understand the

organization's culture more in one-on-one settings, and discussions and brainstorming sessions regarding how to best manage the culture. CHROs reported that many BODs and CEOs have been consistently focused on culture, but a large number also noted that both groups are increasingly focused on it, usually due to their increasing recognition of culture's impact on firm outcomes such as performance, engagement, diversity &

inclusion (D&I), and merger and acquisition (M&A) success.

Finally, CHROs described their role in culture in ways that are helpful, specific, and to some extent, confusing. They describe some very clear ways that they help manage culture, but these descriptions vary greatly, indicating that little consensus seems to exist regarding the best or most important roles that CHROs play in building, transforming, and maintaining culture.





*According to the  
2018 HR@Moore Survey of CHROs,  
**CULTURE** has risen  
to rank number 3  
among the deliverables CEOs  
demand from the CHRO.*

**- Patrick M. Wright**



## INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The construct of organizational culture has emerged as a popular topic within the business press. While Chief Human Resource Officers (CHROs) have always viewed culture within their purview, the popularization of culture has caused it to become even higher on their list of priorities. Recent scandals at companies such as Wells Fargo (employees fraudulently creating customer accounts to meet required growth goals), Uber (women perceiving that they were not on an equal footing with men inside the organization), and the too numerous to list of executives exposed as serial harassers through the #MeToo movement have all been attributed to a “culture” that either promoted or allowed such dysfunctional behavior to exist. This forced Boards of Directors (BOD) and CEOs to increasingly attend to culture. For instance, Larry Fink’s past two letters to shareholders emphasized that BlackRock would encourage, if not require, CEOs of the companies in which they invest to articulate the larger “purpose” of their firms, and his discussion of purpose is frequently tied in the concept of culture. Such external consideration is encouraging CEOs to focus greater attention on managing their firm’s culture.

These developments are resulting in culture becoming one of the CHRO’s most important deliverables to the CEO. Every year our survey asks about the top three deliverables CEOs demand from the CHRO, and for the first 6-8 years culture appeared in the bottom half of the top 10. Yet, in the 2018 survey it rose to rank number 3. Similarly, the new model of the CHRO role developed by CHROs in conjunction with Gartner contains “Driver of Culture and Purpose” as one of the seven key roles of a CHRO. Thus, one key theme of the 2019 HR@Moore Survey of Chief HR Officers focused on comparing boards, CEOs, and CHROs in terms of their perceptions of the importance and impact of culture, and explored the CHRO’s role in culture.

We sent this year’s survey to 418 CHROs and received 122 responses for a response rate of 29%. In addition to the questions on culture, the survey also addressed the time spent in various aspects of the CHRO’s role, how Executive Leadership Teams (ELTs) function, and how boards and ELTs assess their performance. These topics will be addressed in later reports.

The culture part of the survey asked a number of quantitative items regarding the extent to which BODs, CEOs, and CHROs know and understand culture and the impact that culture has on a number of outcomes. We also asked open ended questions regarding how BOD’s and CEO’s views of culture have changed over the past two years, and what CHROs do to help them with culture. We conclude by asking an overall question about the CHRO’s role in culture. We first cover the quantitative data comparing perceptions. We then summarize the results regarding changes in perceptions and CHRO help with boards and CEOs, respectively. Finally, we discuss how CHROs believe they play a role in culture.

*\*This report was funded by the Center for Executive Succession in the Darla Moore School of Business at the University of South Carolina. Any errors of omission or commission, however, are the sole responsibility of the authors.*



“...while they may be interested in culture, [board members] have no day-to-day exposure or clear ability to directly impact culture.”



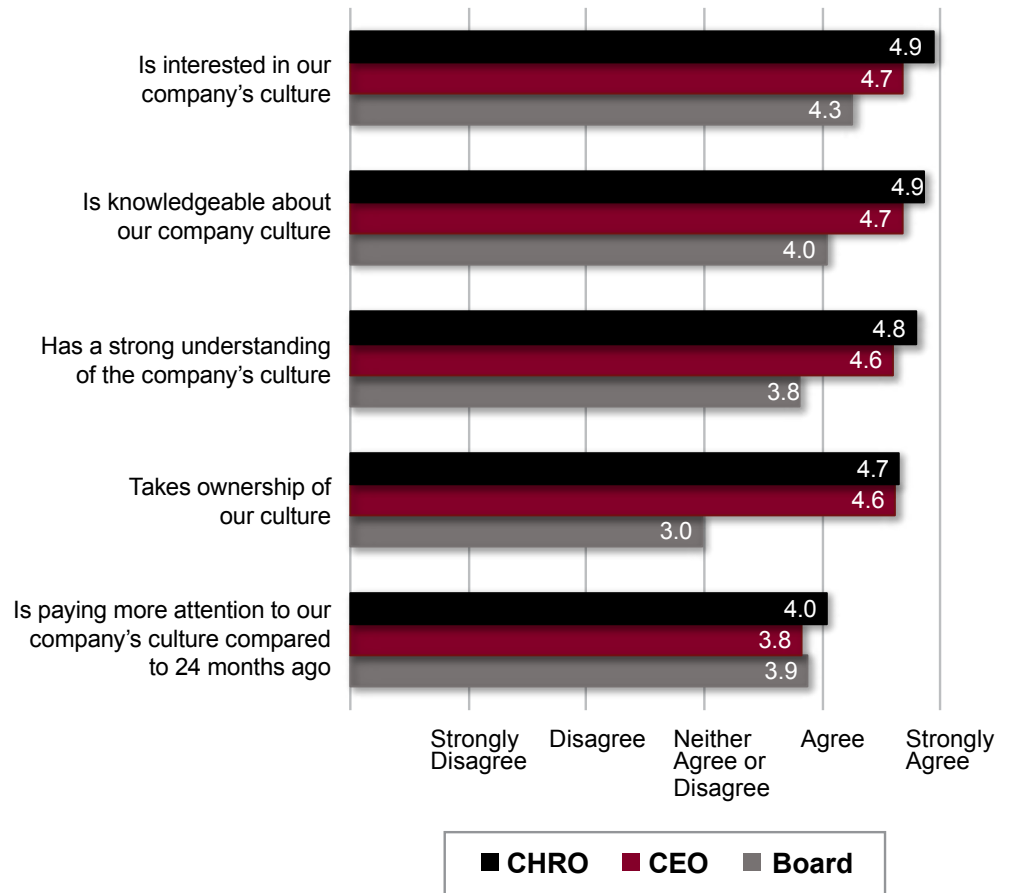
KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

We first asked a series of questions regarding the BOD’s, CEO’s and CHRO’s knowledge and understanding of the company’s culture. These items included “Is interested in our company’s culture,” “Is knowledgeable about our company’s culture,” “Has a strong understanding of our company’s culture,” “Takes ownership of our company’s culture,” and “Is paying more attention to our company’s culture compared to 24 months ago.” **Figure 1** compares data regarding the BOD, CEO, and CHRO. As can be seen in this figure, not surprisingly CHROs rate almost 5 on all but one of the items (is paying more attention), displaying a universal high level of knowledge and understanding of the culture.

The data regarding CEOs displays similar results, albeit slightly lower than CHROs. Whereas CHROs showed ratings from 4.7 to 4.9, CEOs ranged from 4.6 to 4.7. Again, not surprisingly, the data regarding boards showed the lowest ratings, ranging from 3.0 to 4.3. The fact that they only scored 3.0 on taking ownership of the culture is not unexpected. Many board members essentially “helicopter” in and out 4-8 times a year for board meetings, and many of those visits are to hotels or resorts, and not on company sites where they might observe the inner workings of the company. Thus, while they may be

interested in culture, they have no day-to-day exposure or clear ability to directly impact culture.

**Figure 1**  
Knowledge and Understanding of Culture



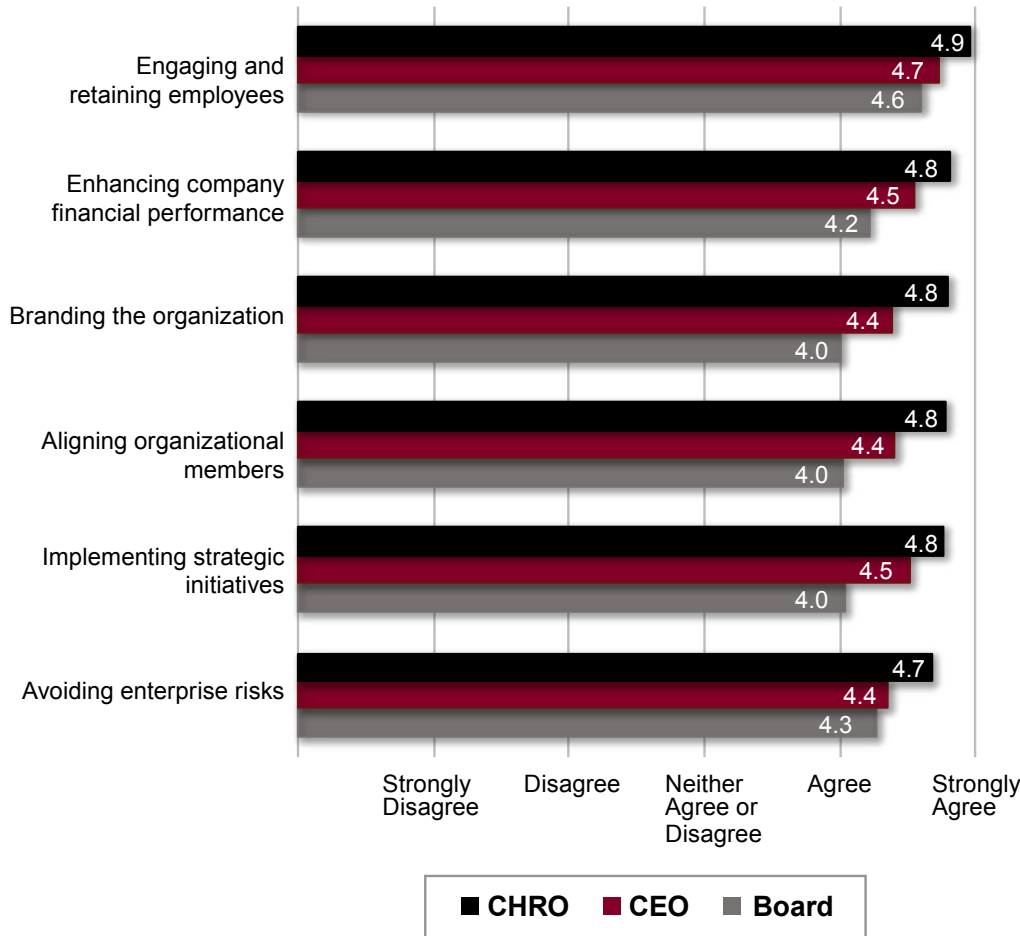
KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF CULTURE

We then asked CHROs to indicate how these three (BOD, CEO, CHRO) view the impact

of culture. We asked them how much each group believed that culture impacts “Engaging

and retaining employees,” “Enhancing company financial performance,” “Branding the organization,” “Aligning organizational members,” “Implementing strategic initiatives,” and “Avoiding enterprise risks.” **Figure 2** displays the comparative results.

**Figure 2**  
Beliefs about Culture



Again, on all of these items CHROs had the highest scores, ranging from 4.7 (avoiding enterprise risks) to 5.0 (engaging and retaining employees). The scores for CEOs was also high ranging from 4.4 (avoiding enterprise risks, branding the organization, and aligning organizational members) to 4.7 (engaging employees). CHROs reported BODs as having beliefs in the positive impact of culture, albeit not as high as the other two, ranging from 4.0 (branding the organization, aligning organizational members, and implementing strategic initiatives) to 4.6 (engaging and retaining employees). However, the most significant divergence of the board from the other two was regarding avoiding enterprise risks. On that outcome scores for the CEO and CHRO perceptions were the lowest of the six categories, whereas it was rated as the second highest as perceived by the board. Thus, while BODs seem to understand the positive impact of culture on a number of outcomes, they tend to view culture as a risk mitigation tool to a larger extent than CEOs or CHROs.



THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE

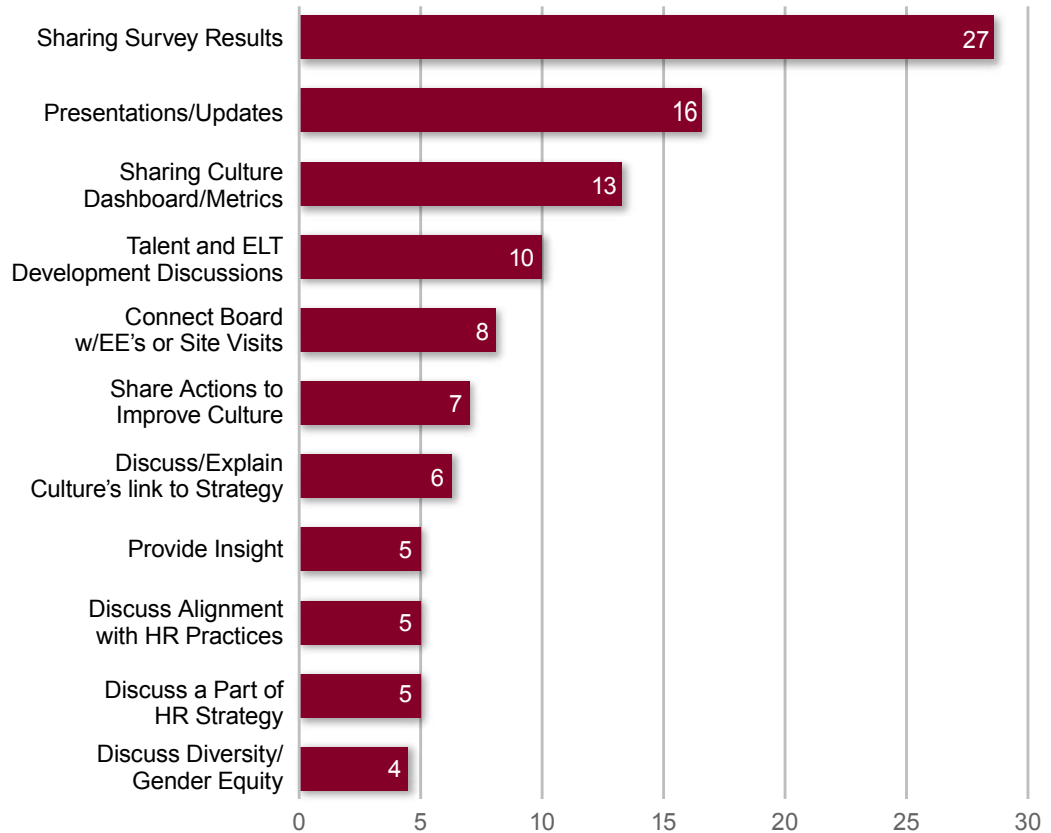
To delve more deeply into understanding the CHROs' role in culture, we asked them a series of open-ended questions. First, we asked how they helped the board and the CEO with culture. Then we also asked them how the BODs and CEOs view of culture had changed. Finally we asked them specifically what they believed to be the CHROs role in culture.

**BOD, CHROs and CULTURE**

**Figure 3** displays the tabulation of our coding of the open-ended responses about how CHROs help the BOD with culture.

**Table 1** (on the following page) provides examples of how CHROs described helping the board with culture. However, the responses were not always clear and so there may be significant overlap between different categories. For instance, a number of CHROs noted specifically that they share engagement/culture survey data with the BOD, while others noted a more ambiguous "presentations/updates" without specifying the content of those updates. In addition, 13 noted that they share culture dashboard metrics, which we would assume to include engagement/culture survey results among other metrics (e.g., turnover). Also, CHROs did not go into detail, but ten noted that culture was part of the discussion with the BOD in talent and ELT

**Figure 3**  
Helping the Board with Culture



discussions. Eight noted that they connect the board with employees, usually, but not exclusively through setting up board member site visits. CHROs also discussed how they would explain to the board the actions their

company was taking to improve culture and also how culture was an integral part of the firm's strategy. Finally, they discussed culture as part of the HR strategy and how HR practices aligned with culture.

**THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE**

**Table 1**

Examples of how CHROs work with the Board on culture

<p>Meeting with the Compensation, Nomination and Governance, and Audit/Risk committees several times a year to give periodic updates across a variety of metrics, processes, and issues. Formally review a detailed report at each Audit committee meeting and do a full board review annually.</p>
<p>Providing regular updates on our cultural transformation work, beginning with new vision, mission, purpose. Provide detailed information on communications and rollout of cultural programs across the company</p>
<p>Providing annual updates on our engagement survey; attrition/retention of senior level talent; review of ethics program and complaints; review of D&amp;I strategy and progress, gender pay equity, and gender pay gap</p>
<p>Utilizing our Board Buddy program so board members are matched with ELT members. Board members at XXX are very involved with employees. They travel around our company, meet with high potential leaders, do all hands meetings with employees, meet with our employee resource groups, and more.</p>
<p>Conducting people strategy discussions, reporting on culture survey results, bringing in employees to talk to the board so the board can hear the culture from them, bringing the board out into the business to meet with employees in the field without management.</p>
<p>Presenting culture survey results highlighting where culture has an impact in the business; what we are doing to improve culture and why (e.g., to become more “nimble”)</p>
<p>Leading and facilitating annual Talent &amp; Organizational Review; addressing organizational/culture topics in meetings throughout the year; responding to ad hoc communications (emails) from BOD members based on various “culture” topics which are often triggered by things they read elsewhere.</p>



## THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE

When discussing how the board's view of culture has changed over the past 3 years, **Figure 4** shows that the most frequent response was that they continue to have the same strong focus. However, the vast majority of CHROs noted that the board's view of culture has changed, either in terms of how it impacts important outcomes, or because of some external events. Regarding outcomes, a number of CHROs indicated that BODs were increasingly recognizing the importance of culture as a driver of business performance, as a way of mitigating risk, and as a driver of attraction and retention of talent. In terms of things causing BODs to increasingly focus on culture, CHROs noted that shareholder and other pressure around Environment, Social, and Governance (ESG), Diversity and Inclusion (D&I), and Merger and Acquisitions (M&A) activities is leading BODs to focus more on culture.

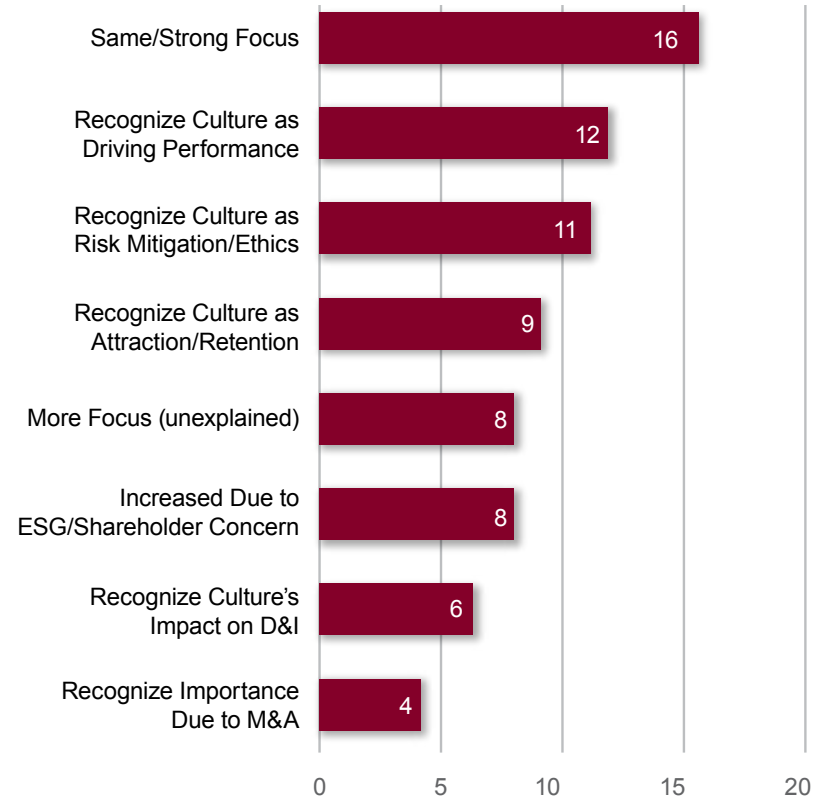
Overall, our results find that BODs need CHRO assistance to understand the culture that exists and how it is managed within the firm. Given that BODs increasingly recognize its importance, this provides CHROs an additional avenue to interact with and influence the board.

### CEOs, CHROs and CULTURE

The same two questions noted above were asked regarding how CHROs help their CEO with culture. These answers seemed much clearer and more specific. As seen in **Figure 5** (on the following page), by far, the most frequent response was that CHROs have regular discussions (21) with the CEO regarding culture. Similar to the board, CHROs also review metrics (15) which probably include engagement survey data (4). They noted that they partner with the CEO to generate ideas and strategies for how to manage culture (15). Importantly, they noted that they help the CEO in holding leaders

**Figure 4**

The Board's Changing View of Culture



accountable (11) for supporting and modeling the culture. Similar to their role with the BOD, CHROs also discuss the alignment of HR programs and practices with culture (8) and show culture's link to strategy (5). **Table 2** (on page 13) displays examples of how CHROs described their role in helping the CEO with culture.

THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE

**Figure 6** shows that a large number (23) of CHROs noted that over the last three years, their CEO has always focused or continues to focus on culture. However, more (34) CHROs reported that their CEO has increased focus on culture in the last three years. This increase has occurred for a variety of reasons such as culture's impact on Diversity and Inclusion (8), performance (7), engagement (6), Agility and speed (3), and mergers and acquisition success (3). In addition, seven CHROs noted that their CEO was more focused on culture without

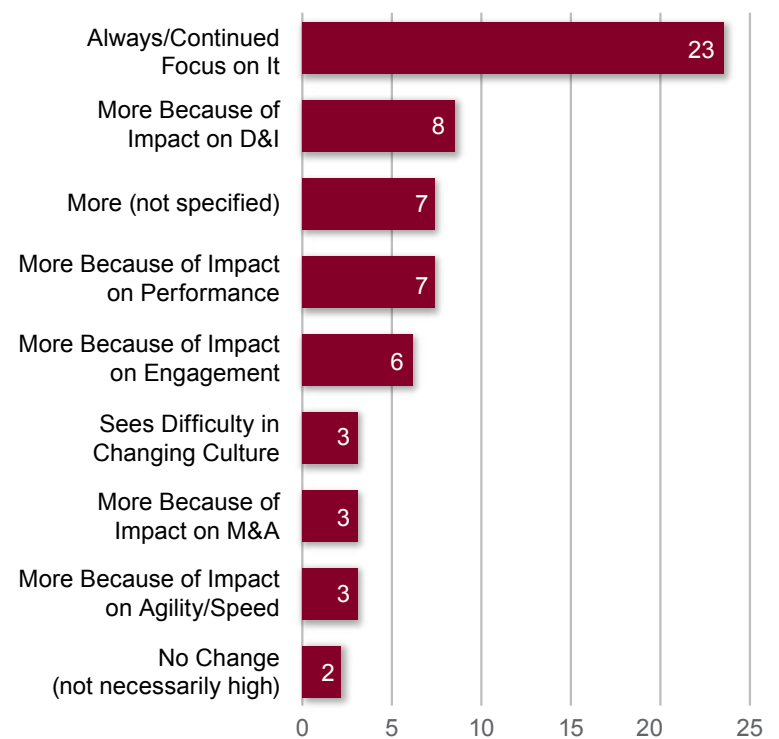
explaining why. **Table 3** (on page 15) provides examples of how BODs and CEOs' views of culture have changed.

These results lead us to believe that culture will continue to grow in importance for the CEO. With boards recognizing the importance of culture and CEOs increasingly recognizing its impact on important firm outcomes, CHROs have a tremendous opportunity to build credibility through helping both to understand and manage the company's culture.

**Figure 5**  
Helping the CEO with Culture



**Figure 6**  
The CEO's Changing View of Culture





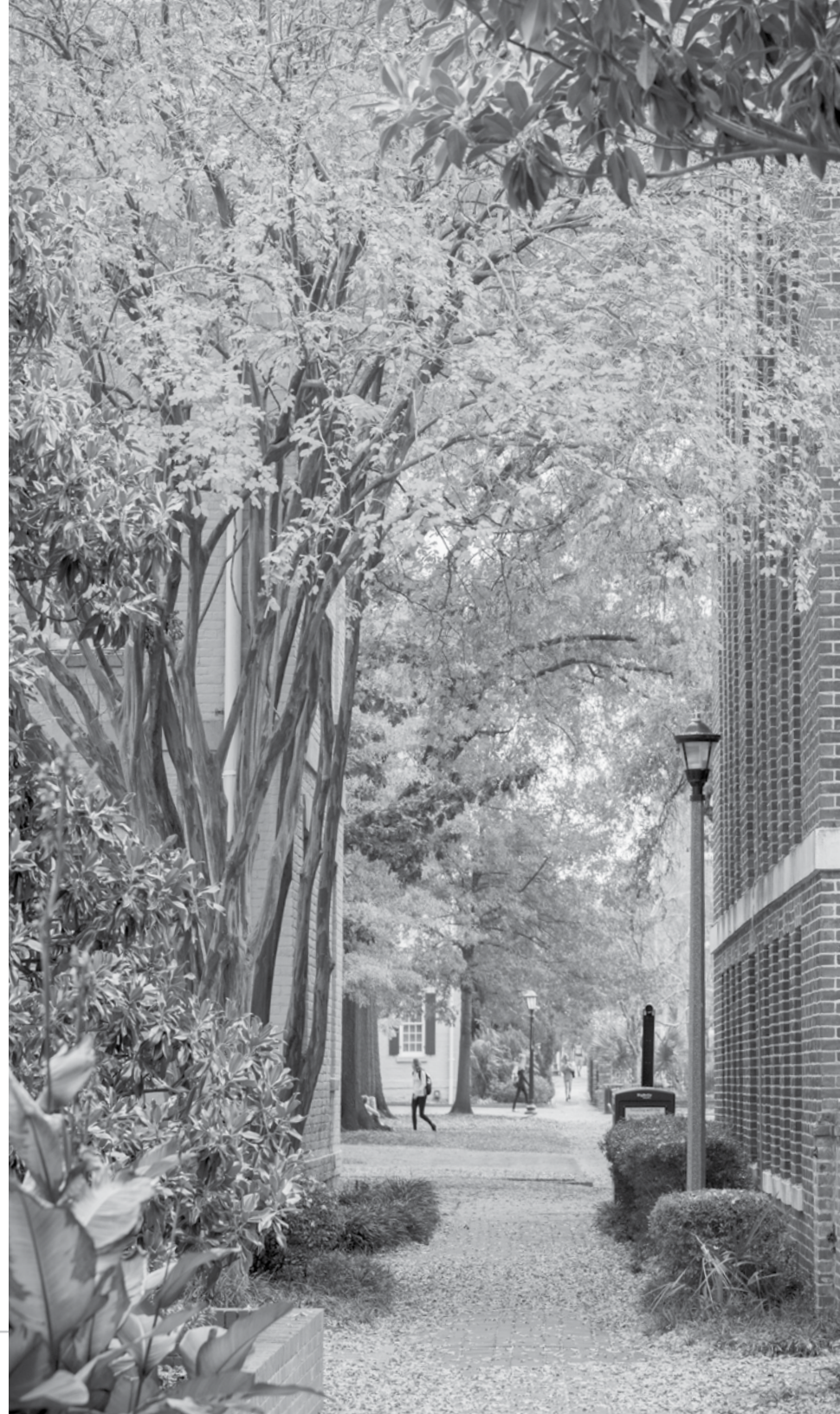
**THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE**

**Table 2**

Examples of how CHROs work with the CEO on Culture

<p>Defining purpose of the organization; integrating culture into strategic imperatives for company; aligning senior leadership behaviors with desire culture; promoting (or removing) executives to reinforce the culture.</p>
<p>Conducting deep dives on purpose and culture. We have been specific on which cultural attributes need to change and have built these into performance management, compensation, training and development, talent choices, etc.</p>
<p>Understanding that culture is critical to company performance. S/He has articulated a clear vision for our People First Culture. It is the role of the CHRO to align processes and programs to reinforce culture. In other words, the CEO has written a big check, and the CHRO has to figure out how to make sure the account has sufficient funds.</p>
<p>Providing insights and data, and determining opportunities to shift the culture. Recently planned and facilitated an executive retreat on culture for the ELT. Created a c-suite executive session focused on culture and delivery of results.</p>
<p>Creating the architecture of the desired culture together. Setting the strategic cultural priorities and managing the senior team in our plans to cultivate the right culture. Initiating work with his/her new team on this topic.</p>
<p>Providing a realistic view of what culture exists in the lower levels of the organization. As we grow, s/he gets further away from the reality of our team members and as a result is more disconnected from the culture than s/he would like to admit.</p>
<p>Working with his/her directs so survey and work on action plans address any opportunities for improvement. Additionally, working with his/her communications team to ensure that the executive communications maps reinforce our leadership and cultural aspirations.</p>

*“With boards recognizing the importance of culture and CEOs increasingly recognizing its impact on important firm outcomes, CHROs have a tremendous opportunity to build credibility through helping both to understand and manage the company’s culture.”*





**THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE**

**Table 3**

Examples of how views of culture have changed in recent years

Board of Directors	CEOs
<p>The BOD has become much more focused on the culture as they believe the positive culture can lead to better customer service and better customer experience. They also want the company to be known as a great place to work and know that a piece of that is culture.</p>	<p>Deeper connection to the underlying purpose of the company. More awareness of the connection between culture and our inclusion and diversity aspirations. More focus on culture as a key driver of how we do business.</p>
<p>They pay much more attention than ever before. They want to understand the enterprise, segment and CEO, Executive Leadership, and CHRO results. They feel there is a direct connection between the health of the organization and the results.</p>	<p>It hasn't. She has always understood and embraced the importance of defining, building, and reinforcing the elements of our culture.</p>
<p>Increased shareholder interest and governance pressure have increased the focus on culture for the BOD. Significant changes in the ELT have also heightened interest in dialogue on preserving while evolving the culture.</p>	<p>With no emphasis on MMV – s/he feels we have lost our way in the areas of passion and tenacity – that the organization needs a North Star to align around and understanding where we are going in the future. Our strategy work and the future of our org is all centered around culture and redefining what it takes at our organization.</p>
<p>In light of major culture failures at other companies, boards are waking up to the importance culture plays in performance – both individually (e.g., #metoo) and systemically (e.g., Wells Fargo/Uber/Facebook).</p>	<p>Increased commitment to diversity, inclusion, and social responsibility</p>
<p>It has been more focused and top of mind. They want to understand how we are protecting and promoting that which makes the culture great, while simultaneously shaping that which could get in the way of our success in the future.</p>	<p>The CEO is relatively new and unfortunately does not seem to be concerned about the culture of the organization. S/he outwardly speaks of its importance but his/her actions prove that it is not important to him/her.</p>
	<p>I believe that it has broadened from one of just driving compliance and operational excellence to truly driving a more engaging culture that supports an Agile way of working.</p>

## THE CHRO'S ROLE IN CULTURE

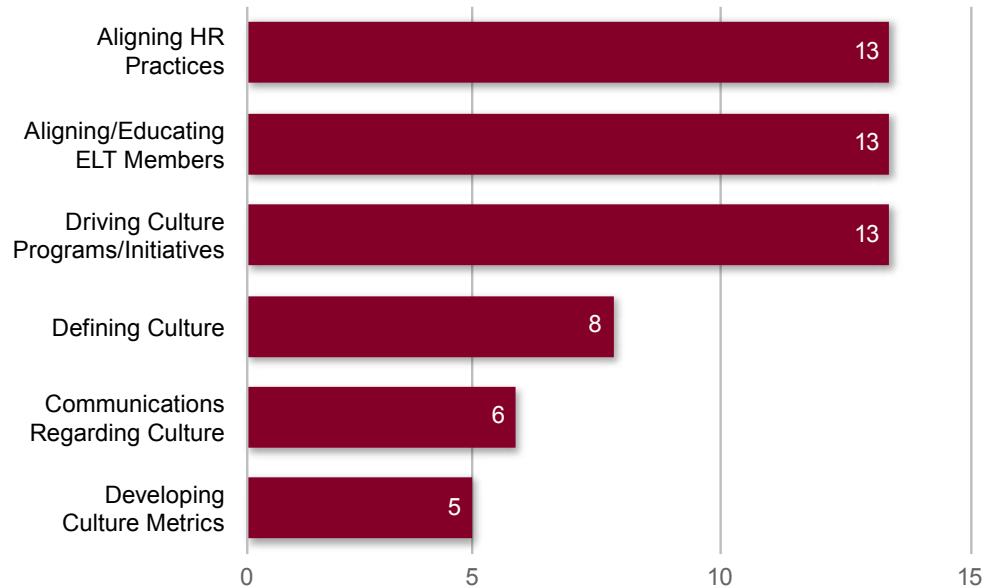
Finally, we asked CHROs what their role in culture was and received a number of interesting answers shown in **Figure 7**. Three roles tied for most mentioned with 13 CHROs noting them: Driving culture programs and initiative, aligning and educating ELT members around culture, and aligning HR practices to support the culture. A number (8) of CHROs described their role in culture as defining it, probably by leading the process to develop cultural values. CHROs also described their role as facilitating communications regarding culture and developing cultural metrics.

In answering this question, CHROs used a variety of terms to describe their role in culture. To better insight into the variety of ways that CHROs articulate this, we coded these terms into different roles. As can be seen in **Figure 8**, by far the most frequently mentioned term was “steward” (8). Two CHROs each mentioned three other terms: “architect,” “owner,” and “leader”. Other terms used were “custodian,” “advocate/ambassador,” “role model,” “accelerator,” “pulse-keeper,” “strategist,” “facilitator,” “chief of staff,” and “conscience.”

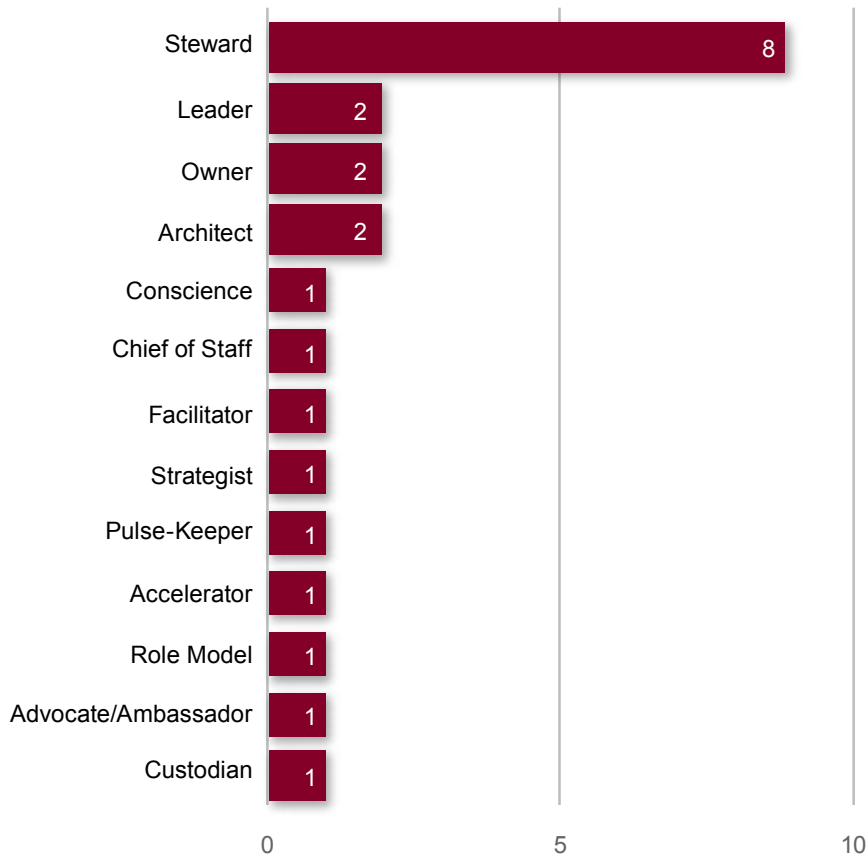
Our interpretation of these results lead us to believe that while CHROs describe a heavy role in culture, this does not mean that consensus exists regarding exactly what that role should be. It may be that most CHROs

perform many of the roles described above, but only reported those that they spend the most time in. However, even if this is the case, it still suggests that the CHRO's role in culture is not particularly well defined.

**Figure 7**  
The CHRO's Role in Culture



**Figure 8**  
Terms used to Describe CHRO's Role in Culture



**SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

Because of the centrality of CHROs to the management of culture in organizations, they must continually focus on ensuring that boards, CEOs, and senior leaders understand how and why it is important. They constantly educate the board regarding the current state (both positives and negatives) of culture and of the programs and processes being implemented to build or change the culture. They also need to demonstrate through data how culture impacts important outcomes such as engagement, alignment, and performance.

CHROs also play an important role with CEOs. With CEOs who value culture, CHROs help them refine their thinking, brainstorm ways to effectively manage culture, and help them hold senior leaders accountable for modeling the culture. For CEOs who do not seem to naturally “get it” (or who intellectually understand its importance, but who do not display a passion for it), CHROs have to act almost as ventriloquists, prompting them to at least say the right things publicly to show support for culture from the top.

And while CEOs hold responsibility for defining the culture, building and managing it requires that the systems and processes that touch the workforce drive those cultural values. Thus, CHROs play the critical role in designing and delivering those systems to ensure that the culture becomes real throughout the organization.

Culture has risen in importance on the agendas of both CEOs and boards. Effectively managing culture within firms requires that CHROs educate the board, collaborate with the CEO, and drive systems and process throughout the organization.



“*...CHROs report being critically involved in culture, particularly through helping the BOD to understand it and the CEO to manage it.*”



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*This research was supported by the Center for Executive Succession, Darla Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina. All conclusions and/or errors, however, are solely the responsibility of the authors.*





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In 1998, the school was named for South Carolina native Darla Moore, making the University of South Carolina the first major university to name its business school after a woman.

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