

SHK

**Executive team  
architecture and  
the role of the  
Chief People  
Officer**



## When strategy stalls, look up: Why executive team architecture is becoming a board priority

After 25 years as an HR leader — eight of those operating at executive level, reporting to CEOs and working closely with boards — I’ve learned to be cautious about neat explanations for organisational underperformance.

When strategy stalls, it’s rarely because the strategy is flawed.

More often, the organisation lacks the leadership architecture to carry it.

This is not something boards or executive teams intentionally get wrong. Executive teams tend to evolve rather than being designed — roles added as the business grows, responsibilities stretched in response to pressure, and expectations layered over time. What starts as pace and pragmatism can quietly become misalignment. And eventually, drag.

In recent years, my conversations with boards and CEOs have shifted. Fewer questions about individual capability. More questions that sound like this:

**“Is our executive team actually set up to deliver what we’re asking of it?”**

That question matters more than it might first appear.

## Executive teams are often built for the past

Most executive teams are assembled for a specific moment:

- a growth phase
- a transformation agenda
- a change in ownership or leadership
- a response to market disruption.

What's less common is for those teams to be redesigned when the strategy changes. Over time, tensions appear such as blurred accountabilities, overloaded roles, important decisions pushed upwards, unresolved handoffs between functions, siloed operating rhythms. These often present as performance or behaviour issues, but at their core they are architectural. What I'm seeing increasingly is recognition that **no amount of individual effort compensates for a leadership system that is no longer fit for purpose.**

## What I mean by executive team architecture

When I talk about executive team architecture, I don't mean restructures, organisational charts or renaming roles.

I mean asking more fundamental questions:

- Why does this executive team exist as a collective?
- Are senior roles designed around today's strategy, or yesterdays?
- Where do enterprise decisions truly get made?
- How clean are the interfaces between commercial, operational and people accountabilities?
- How resilient is the leadership system if one or two key individuals step out?

Like good physical architecture, leadership architecture needs to anticipate load and stress. When it's sound, execution flows. When it isn't, even strong leaders become constrained.

## The changing contribution of the Chief People Officer

This is where the role of the Chief People Officer (CPO) has shifted most meaningfully.

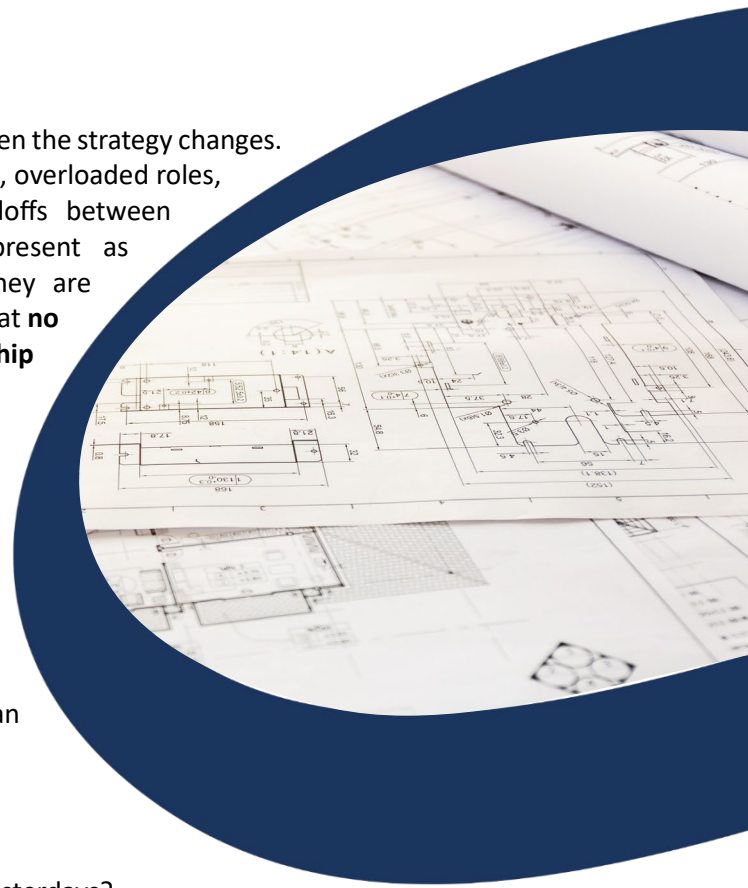
In my last eight years as an executive CPO, the work that created the greatest value was not transactional. It was enterprise-level: shaping leadership structures; advising on succession risk; influencing operating models; and helping boards understand the people implications of strategic choices before they became problems.

At their best today, CPOs bring:

- a system-wide view of leadership effectiveness
- long-term insight into capability and succession risk
- the confidence to call out structural issues, not just behavioural symptoms
- commercial fluency that connects people decisions to enterprise outcomes.

Boards are increasingly engaging with CPOs not as functional heads, but as strategic partners in governance, organisational design and risk.

That shift didn't happen overnight, but it is now unmistakable.



## A new lens, not a new opinion

I've recently stepped into executive search, and while I'm early in that chapter, it has given me a useful additional lens.

Search sits between aspiration and reality: what boards say they need, what roles are actually designed to do, and what the market can reasonably provide. It has reinforced something I already believed from my executive years:

- When there is persistent misalignment at the top, the issue is rarely talent alone.

More often, it's the architecture the talent is operating within.

## A question boards would do well to pause on, together with their CEO and CPO

If your strategy shifted materially tomorrow:

- Would your executive team's structure accelerate delivery, or quietly constrain it?

That question is becoming a board-level responsibility.

And answering it well may be one of the most valuable contributions an experienced CPO can make, not just as a people leader, but as a steward of the enterprise.

## About the author



Samira (Sam) Richards is a Partner at SHK and leads the firm's Chief People Officer practice. She brings more than 25 years' executive leadership experience across emergency services, higher education, health and aged care. Sam has held enterprise-wide accountability for People and Culture in complex, high-profile organisations, partnering closely with CEOs, Executive teams and Boards to align workforce strategy with organisational performance, risk management and long-term sustainability. Sam has led large teams spanning the full suite of human resources functions, including workforce strategy & planning, people partnering, industrial & employee relations, organisational development & capability and talent acquisition plus health, safety & wellbeing. She has consistently built high-performing teams and strengthened leadership and executive capability in operationally intensive, highly scrutinised environments. Sam believes contemporary people leadership must directly enable strategy execution and measurable performance outcomes. She is passionate about engaged leadership, inclusion and is a strong advocate for leveraging technology and meaningful workforce data to inform decision-making, strengthen governance and create

more capable, future-ready workplaces.

Her executive credibility, enterprise perspective and deep understanding of risk and governance position her as a trusted adviser to Boards and CEOs in appointing Chief People Officers and senior leaders who can drive performance, lead transformation and build enduring organisational capability and culture.

Sam holds a Science degree from the University of Sheffield, United Kingdom, and a Postgraduate Diploma in Human Resource Management from La Trobe University, Melbourne.

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