From traditional corporations to innovative technology companies to international organizations, Michaela Oliver has run the gamut of human resources. The one thing that stays constant is her enthusiasm and eagerness to break tradition and think outside of the box to make human resources work best for the situation at hand.

Michaela Oliver, senior vice president of Human Resources at Rosetta Stone, has a mischievous gleam in her eye that betrays her intense curiosity and driving desire to find unorthodox solutions. These often work exactly because they are not based on tradition. Her office is sparse, lean and does not rise above the others in her corporate headquarters. It is all whiteboard on one wall. Each time I visited, someone else’s innovative ideas were drawn there, often with comical characters or provocative statements. I came away with the impression that her people come in and share cool ideas there regularly.

I chose Oliver to be one of our keynotes at a recent Strategy+Innovation symposium. She refused to do a traditional presentation because, in her words, ‘They don’t work!’ Instead, the two of us had a conversation that involved the audience. The day of the event I arrived, my tie not yet tied but draped around my shoulders. ‘You’re not going to wear that,’ she told me. ‘But it’s my tie,’ I said. Instead I ended up with it stuffed in my jacket pocket and worked alongside her with an open collar.

Ordinarily that might not seem like a big deal, but what I have discovered is that when you are by her side you soon find yourself
dealing with the environment in nontraditional ways that at first seem awkward but ultimately work. She herself was wearing reptile skin shoes that bespeak the wildness you feel when you talk to her, like something exciting is about to happen, something not at all expected. And she delivers. When it comes to strategy and innovation, she knows how to bring the two together in an unconventional game plan that delivers on results. Here are some excerpts from our conversation that day.

Seth Kahn: Micheala, I know you spent some time in Kazakhstan. What did you learn there that influences your work today?

Michaela Oliver: I went to Kazakhstan with Mobil Oil. An opportunity came up with my husband. He was offered a position there, and now I was about to be able to experience the former Soviet Union countries. He asked, ‘Why would you want to work in Kazakhstan?’ I told him, ‘I have a lot of energy. I like to learn and I learn fast. I move fast, and I know people here in the U.S. I can help get things done and help you with your business.’ It must have worked because I worked for Mobil Oil for about two years in Kazakhstan.

It was an eye-opening experience. I was in a different culture. I didn’t speak the language. I was in an industry that is over a hundred years old. They think they know exactly what they are doing when going overseas. However, I saw how we could do it differently. I came up with my husband. He was offered a position there, and now it’s the CEO and the board. AQ: How do you work with a new CEO?

Michaela: The more I get to know you, the more I appreciate your way of doing things, often not by the book. Tell us how you view human resources.

AQ: I look at HR as being right there in the middle of the business. It’s about the people. So much of the time companies think about HR from an administrative standpoint. They don’t think about it being key to the business, so they operate that way, with HR as not being important. I look at HR as giving them feedback that is not how they want them to do it. If someone is junior who may not be thinking about it. They think, ‘Oh, there is no dress policy, I can wear whatever,’ but then all of a sudden it’s senior and they are in charge of their own dress at Rosetta Stone. If they are in the right time. We must ensure we have the talent. We first had to develop and get people exposed to new experiences, but sometimes in life you are handed a crisis, a fire, and you have no option but to change people out completely and fast. Everything comes back to the people.

AQ: Do you see what is going on here? Other people look at this and think this is about compliance. Micheala looks at it and sees this is an opportunity to have a conversation, get clarity on what Rosetta Stone is about and build in a mindset that will consistently lead to success even outside the issue being discussed. It is about creating clarity and action to work the organization. It is much easier just to write a policy and give people a hard time. Instead Micheala is jumpstarting important conversations.

AQ: “I blew up as many policies as I could get rid of... There is a balance... You need courage to find the balance, not pay it safe.”

Michaela, what do you do when employees go too far? How do you create policies that anticipate the guidelines you want to establish in the workplace?

Michaela: We have to meet the people where they are. If someone is coming from the line, we would have a conversation. It happens, and it is typically someone who is junior who may not be thinking about it. They think, ‘Oh, there is no dress policy, I can wear whatever,’ but then all of a sudden they are in a meeting with a client and their manager sees them and gives them feedback that is not how they want them to dress with a client.

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AQ: Do you have any experience doing HR with a new leader?

MO: We launched a new CEO feedback survey, followed by an engagement survey, then talked to people to understand the results more deeply and to let
everyone know that he had heard their feedback. At the time, we were struggling with our product. But our employees loved our product. Even though there were some issues with it, the employees didn’t want our new CEO to go off in a completely different direction.

At the same time, there were other things wrong with what we were doing. I began to think it had to do with our values, and maybe we needed to update them. But when the survey came back, it was clear that people loved our values, they wanted to keep the values but wanted to ensure that leaders were actually representing our values.

The survey pointed us toward making sure that everybody was in alignment. As a result, our CEO did a number of roundtables to listen more deeply and that generated tremendous alignment. I attribute a lot of our recent success we are having today to those being open to feedback from our people.

AQ: You have had some significant changes: a new CEO and an IPO. How were you rolling this out on a global level? How did you include the offices in Asia and Europe? How do you ensure that everyone is on the same page with the culture changes and advancements?

MO: All our surveys have been global, and they have all been translated to the local languages to ensure that there was not any confusion. Afterward our CEO went on the road. I went on the road. Other leaders have been on the road to talk to employees in the different offices overseas to understand any disconnects. We put in a real effort to connect everyone, to provide a cohesive message, to include everyone. We also recently relocated our head of Global Consumer to Tokyo, Japan, as a way of messaging that Asia is central to our business and not all of our leadership sits in the U.S.

AQ: I work with a firm that recently went through a CEO change. It was a complete change of leadership. What did you do to ensure everyone was on the same page with the culture changes and advancements?

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AQ: How do you choose to structure your Human Resources department so that it best aligns with the initiatives of the business?

MO: That’s a good one. I actually just shifted things around to more of a global perspective. I had people who were more regionally oriented. I am in the middle of shifting, so, for example, I am not having the head of Korea HR just focused on Korea. She’s going to be working on performance initiatives as well so that she brings in the global perspective. She now reports directly to me. Before it used to be a dotted line to me and a hard line to the country director. Those things change, though, as it cycles. I tell people, ‘Don’t get worried about it. This is just a normal thing for HR functions.’

I like to keep people from feeling stuck in the local mindset. They can lead some of the global initiatives that we’re doing, and if they do something we haven’t done in the U.S., let us look at it and share it. I would say this is essentially my approach in other key markets. I want people to contribute to the overall culture as well as the local one. I don’t want anyone to get stuck in a particular mindset. It is that cultural openness that makes it possible for innovation, which directly contributes to strategy.

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