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**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 Dave Hennessy. This episode features Mike Nicholson, the Chief People Officer at Precision BioSciences in Durham, North Carolina. I was actually down in Mike's office at an old tobacco building that was totally renovated, you know, with the exposed beam and different facets of tobacco manufacturing were very present in some of the relics leftover from that are part of the renovation work they've done. Very creative and warm space that they have in that building. Mike has one of the most unique career paths to becoming a CPO of all of our guests so far. You'll really enjoy his personal career journey and his fresh approach to the function. They are on a fast growth mode right now, growing to hundreds of people after many years of being a smaller biotech, and lot of connections to the Boston biotech community that we've featured on The Hennessy Report as well. But Mike also shares the excitement of what's going on down in Durham and RTP with regard to life sciences and technology, and it's exciting to hear his perspective and what's going on in that market as well.

Coming up on the podcast, we have Melanie Foley, the Chief Talent Officer at Liberty Mutual Insurance. I told you about her coming up soon already, and also we have the President, Juna Pierre, of the New England chapter of the National Association of African Americans in Human Resources, NAAHR. And also, another podcast that's upcoming is Tiffany Mosher, the chief people officer at Dataxu. And now I bring in my discussion with Mike Nicholson.

Hello, Mike. Good to have you on the podcast.

**Mike Nicholson:** Great to be here.

**Dave:** Here we are in Raleigh, North Carolina. A lot of overlap between Boston and Raleigh. In fact, you were just in Boston a few months ago for the LEAP HR conference, where you met some of our colleagues and our former podcast guests.

**Mike:** That's right.

**Dave:** Andy Porter, Stephanie Franklin at Vertex, Ginger Gregory at Biogen. A lot of connection between Boston and Raleigh, a lot of overlap between industries and companies like Fidelity and Biogen and the biotech community, which is so robust in both cities, as well as the higher ed...the rich higher ed environment. So, great to be down here working with you. Before we start, maybe we can talk a little bit about your background and maybe something early in your life that kind of led you to where you are today in some way.

**Mike:** Sure, so my background is not typical of what you would expect from somebody heading up HR. My career actually started in music. Growing up, I always wanted to be a musician. That was all I ever planned on doing, and actually went to school part time initially to be a musician, and had the opportunity to drop out and go on the road instead, which I did for a few years. In retrospect, I actually



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think that's where my interest in human relations really came about because I had to get along with these crazy musicians I was traveling with, and the crowds we were dealing with. And the club owners that we were desperately trying to get us to pay.

That is a hard game to play though. So after a few years of that, I realized that there was a better future for me that would perhaps require some more schooling. So I went back to college this time for chemistry, then ended up getting a PhD in molecular biology and genetics. And then obviously became a head of HR a decade or so later after that.

**Dave:** How the heck does that happen? How do you go from music to science PhD, and end up in the head of human resources chair. This is a unique path. By the way, before we do that, what musical instrument were you playing? What was the...

**Mike:** Guitar.

**Dave:** You were guitar. Okay. Yep.

**Mike:** I'm a guitar player. So I have found, and maybe you've heard this from other people on your podcast, that there is actually a lot of musicians in science and there's tremendous overlap, I think between sciences and math and music. And I do think they both activate parts of your brain similarly or at least complementary. I always viewed science as an inherently creative activity, just like music, and, as we think about music composition or music improvisation, it's very much about problem solving. It's very much I'm on this chord now, I'm trying to get to this chord and the next bar, what's a fun way to get there? And I think the really great scientists out there – I'm not putting myself in that category, but I certainly tried my best – view experiments the same way, as we know where we are, we know what we're trying to figure out. What's a creative way to get that answer and solve that problem?

Moving from the lab bench into human resources, I think is very much the same question, is we know where we are, we have a goal we're trying to accomplish, what's an interesting way we can create that with the tools we have to potentially answer that question?

**Dave:** Was there something that you were doing as a scientist here that help people see that maybe you should lead this function? Was that a natural step? Can you just talk through how that may have come about?

**Mike:** Sure. And I'll preface it by saying that I'm not a founder of the company, but I'm the first full time employee they had that wasn't a founder.

**Dave:** Almost a founder.

**Mike:** Almost. Yes. I started seven months after the founders did, so after 12 years it's really a matter of semantics at this point. Semantics and equity in the company, I think. At any rate, so I've been here for about 12 years now. And the company was very small for our first nine years. The number that stands out to me in May of 2015, we had 15 employees. That date stands out because that was when we



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started hiring after our Series A, just about a month or so earlier. So to connect those lines, that also tells you that for nine years we didn't have venture capital backing. We were self-funded. We had enough research deals with other partners that we were getting by, but we certainly didn't have the resources to grow the team. So when we did do a Series A investment and had a large influx of cash, we knew where we were going and it was time to start hiring people. So I think partially because of my time at that point had been nine years in the company, I wanted to be very active in how we grew.

And so in fact, I ended up hiring...

**Dave:** Why? Why did you want to be so active in it?

**Mike:** Because I saw the great team that we had assembled. I mean, it was a small team, but it was incredibly functional. It was a very close team. We got an enormous amount of work done, enormous quality of work done given the circumstances. Again, you know, not exactly rolling in cash. We had to work...

**Dave:** Right. You had to be efficient. Right. Right.

**Mike:** Yeah. We had to be efficient, we had to work well together. We had to, you know, we were too small to have politics be involved and. And frankly, maybe it was selfish. I didn't want to mess that up by just starting to hire people willy nilly.

**Dave:** Right.

**Mike:** So we didn't have an internal HR team. We were outsourcing all HR at the time, so we didn't have a recruiter or even a manager of HR to start recruiting, so I kind of took it upon myself to start recruiting people and ended up hiring I think the first 15 or 20 people in our initial growth. So really the first doubling of the company were mostly people that I hired. And I loved it. I loved it because it was great to, again, maybe selfishly, to identify areas that I saw. I couldn't bring to the company, but I knew we needed some great immunologists. So if I can find a great immunologist it was great to bring them on board and make sure that they understood why they were coming.

**Dave:** You didn't want to mess this thing up.

**Mike:** Exactly.

**Dave:** That's why you got involved. You're like, let's keep this thing great.

**Mike:** Exactly. Whether I was qualified or not to do that, I don't know.

**Dave:** But you jumped, you jumped in and said let's do this thing.

**Mike:** I jumped in.



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**Dave:** That's great. So, yeah, you jumped in, you're doing a lot of HR things, bringing on talent. How did you become now the head of HR? Was that another couple of years later or did it come quickly after that growth spurt you're talking about now?

**Mike:** It was gradual. In fact, I had two positions that were in a lot of ways looking back, kind of HR heavy. The first one was something we called Director of Scientific Operations. At that point I was an interim leader of one of the research groups I was hiring, someone to take over full time. I was leading that group in the interim, but in the rest of my time I was facilitating interactions between the groups. I was kind of the liaison between the various research groups and development groups to make sure that we were all well aligned with the company strategy, the scientific strategy, and our growth strategy. At the time, I didn't recognize it, but a lot of what I was doing was in fact HR.

**Dave:** So now you have two examples that you just jumped in and did that were HR things that you weren't calling HR at the time.

**Mike:** Right. Well, because I'm a scientist. I wouldn't possibly do HR. And then after that I ended up being Vice President of Research and Development, and once again found myself, I was either interim leading a group or I didn't have a group overall, but what was leading the company from a higher perspective and really working with the CSO to make sure that his vision was integrated. Which again, involved a lot of working with each team's needs, trying to figure out if they were properly resourced, if we had redundancies, overlapping functions, and if so how can be smooth those out? You know, whether it was moving people or moving functions.

**Dave:** So, workforce planning all the ... Yeah.

**Mike:** Exactly. You get it. So, when we finally reached a point as a company that we saw our trajectory, and I think we were around 100 people and maybe a little bit less, we recognized all right over the next three to five years we're going to continue to grow at this rate. And you know, right now I think we had, or at that point, we had a handle on it, but we really thought, okay, now's the time to really bring somebody in and own this. And we got to talking about what that person would look like and a lot of the characteristics we came up with were somebody that really got the science and understood the scientists and could speak that language. And could really be an integrated part of the business and not a bolt on function. And at some point someone said, "Well, I think that's you."

And of course my scientist hat, that said, "But I'm a scientist." And in fact, over about a two month period of really thinking about it, talking to any HR professional that would listen to me, to have me call out of the blue and say, "Hey, you don't know me but I'm thinking about this job. What do you think?" It became clear that, yeah, that's where my interests were, that's what I was doing, and so I threw my hat in and here I am.

**Dave:** Yeah. You said yes. What a great story about how somebody came into this role. That's awesome. You know, I know all about genome editing and editing DNA, but maybe some of our listeners don't know. Maybe you can put it in layman's terms exactly what you do here at Precision BioSciences so others can understand, not me.



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**Mike:** So others probably know about it more than they think if they've seen the recent movie Rampage...

**Dave:** I haven't seen that yet.

**Mike:** It's something.

**Dave:** Okay.

**Mike:** All kidding aside, so gene editing is ... In our world it's a very old field, but I would say in the world it seems to be a relatively new phenomenon. At this point, a lot of people have probably heard of CRISPR. It was in the news a few months ago. There was an experiment in China that involved using CRISPR on babies.

**Dave:** Yeah. News this week. Yeah.

**Mike:** Yes, that's right. That's right. Still in the news. Conceptually we do something very similar, not editing babies, but the general approach of editing DNA. So we have a tool that we can use to change the code of DNA in any organism. So we can modify it to either turn on certain functions or turn off certain functions, or change the way the DNA actually encodes the information. So, as we think about genetic diseases that are caused by one gene that maybe has one or two defects in it that results in a genetic disease, we can potentially use our tool to go in and modify that DNA to correct that, and restore normal function.

**Dave:** And what is the tool? Is it an injection type tool? It's an organism itself? How does it ... What's the tool look like?

**Mike:** It's a molecule, it's a single molecule. It's a protein.

**Dave:** It's a protein. Yep.

**Mike:** So, you've certainly heard of proteins before. It is a single protein that we engineer that we can change the way it interacts with DNA so that we can target it to any specific gene we feel like modifying. So in the case of a genetic disease, if we know exactly the gene that is involved with this disease, we can target this molecular tool right to that spot to make the edit that we want to get the desired outcome.

**Dave:** Are there certain diseases, therapies that you're close to getting some traction on? Where's the most exciting things for the work that you're doing? Potential I should say.

**Mike:** Yeah, great question. So, we work in three main verticals, From the Precision BioSciences standpoint, we are mostly focused on gene therapy and cell therapy. Cell therapy is most advanced right now for us, and this is where instead of focusing specifically on one gene, we are engineering immune cells to be better cancer killers. In fact, we had our very first IND approved in late 2018. This is approval



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from the FDA to start a clinical trial, and we are making the material for that right now in hopes to be treating patients sometime later this quarter.

**Dave:** That's exciting. Congratulations. And you're in another growth phase, it sounds like. You mentioned to me before we sat down to speak that you expect to be a much larger company. You're at another inflection point here for the organization.

**Mike:** Yes we are.

**Dave:** What's driving that? I imagine some of the things you just said, but what's happening with your growth internally?

**Mike:** That's right. A lot of it to support the cell therapy work, this immune cell programming to fight cancers. It takes an enormous team to make that material, to qualify it, to determine whether or not it's good enough for a clinical trial, and it takes an enormous team to figure out what to do with the results and how to act from there. One thing we are also doing right now is we are bringing in manufacturing in house. For this first trial, we have a contract partner that's doing most of the manufacturing.

**Dave:** There's a lot of those around here, right?

**Mike:** There are.

**Dave:** In Raleigh.

**Mike:** The one we're working with happens to be in Tennessee.

**Dave:** Oh, okay.

**Mike:** That's because we want to go visit Graceland every once in a while, so they're in Memphis. But, as we look at the complex nature of that manufacturing, it's something that we would like to have more control over. So we're actually renovating a manufacturing suite just down the road, in Research Triangle Park now, and hope to bring on a full manufacturing team by late this year, which also adds to that headcount. And then also in gene therapy, we've got a number of studies, none of which are as far as the cell therapy, but we're collecting large animal data now on five or six genetic diseases that we hope to use to pick our lead and backup in short order, and get moving on those very, very quickly so that we can get those into patients that are sorely in need of treatment in the next few years.

**Dave:** That's great. So, let's talk a little bit about the culture here at Precision. What's important to, as you call them, Precisioneers, I think that's the name employees refer to themselves by. Is that really actually used? I saw it on the website. Do people actually use that term?

**Mike:** We do.

**Dave:** Precisioneers.



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**Mike:** People love being a Precisioneer.

**Dave:** All right. That's great. What's important to them, the Precisioneers, about the way people work, the culture here? How would you describe that?

**Mike:** So an important thing to know about the company is if you were to look at the founders and look at the folks that have been here for a while, there's not a lot of expertise outside of Precision BioSciences. Our CEO, this is his first time being a CEO. Our CSO, it's his first time being a CSO. I have never worked in biotech before. This is my first and only job in biotech.

**Dave:** And your first HR job.

**Mike:** And my first HR job. And so what I guess I'm trying to communicate is, we didn't have a lot of understanding of what we should be doing. We couldn't say, oh, when I was at GSK this is how we did it, or well at Novartis this is how we did it. So we largely built a company that we wanted to work for. And that's what people love about being here, is we have built this company really from scratch in our image of what we think an awesome biotech company should be. At its core, we do have five core values that we determined, gosh probably 10 years ago at this point. I remember doing the exercise because it seemed so dumb to me. There were eight of us around the table. We knew each other very intimately, we worked 90 hours a week together, and we decided to come up with core values.

**Dave:** Who came up with this idea, first of all, to do this. How did this happen?

**Mike:** This was our former chief operating officer who started one month after me, so another, another old timer, and he came with this idea. We need to define core values.

**Dave:** We've got to do this. Okay.

**Mike:** And pre HR Mike Nicholson thought this is the dumbest thing we could possibly be doing. In retrospect, I think it was actually genius because it did a couple of things. One, we agreed they were not going to be aspirational. We weren't going to say this is the company we want to be, these are values we want to have. These are values that mean something to us. And two, we haven't forgotten about that. We keep them front and center, and really we view those values as the core, the nonnegotiable things about our culture. They're easy. It's respect, accountability, adaptability, perseverance and innovation.

I always lead off with respect because I think that's at its core what we're about. Is recognizing that we're pushing the envelope. I mean there haven't been companies doing what we're trying to do, so we have to respect the fact that everybody that joins this team, that wants to be a Precisioneer, is all in and they want to contribute. And we have to respect that regardless of what your title is, where your position is, you know, who's to say who's not going to have the next best idea for how to proceed next. So it begins from a place of utmost mutual respect for each other, recognizing that we are all here with the same vision, to use this amazing tool we have to cure people of some really horrible stuff. The rest comes from there.



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**Dave:** That's great. And as you grow, I'm sure a concern of yours is maintaining that, as you have a growth wave coming up now. How have you maintained it as you've grown and what are you thinking about how do you maintain that culture? Or maybe it's slightly evolved. Certainly those principals won't change, but there might be some parts of the culture that evolve as you get larger. So how are you thinking about growth in your culture?

**Mike:** Yeah, and I think what's most important is to not fool ourselves that it's not going to change. You know, we're viewing it very much with open eyes that of course we have to change. As we hit certain milestones, external pressures change. All of a sudden OSHA, who didn't know we existed 10 years ago, very much knows we exist, and other, other governing bodies. So there are things that we have to do as a company in the name of corporate maturity. But, I think you nailed it, right? The core values are called core values for a reason because that's at its centerpiece. And so what we've tried to do is be very intentional about identifying the things that are nonnegotiable, that are things that we won't change, that are things like creativity. That are things like being a data-based company, very, very science driven.

We won't let, necessarily, the business drive decisions. We're built by scientists, made by scientists, run by scientists. So we let the data drive how we do things. Really in terms of growth and making sure we don't lose those non negotiables, it's about constant communication, it's about constant reminder to new people. It's about bringing them in the right way so that they understand from day one what we're about, and making it clear that yes, these are nonnegotiable.

**Dave:** How do you do that? Do you have a process?

**Mike:** We do. We have an onboarding process that is continually evolving. It used to be, you know, in smaller Precision it was as fast as possible. Now here's the crap you have to sign, now get to work. Now it's a little more robust. And in fact, I have a dedicated portion. I've got one hour that I go through the company history and I share some of the stories, I share the day we came up with the values. I share the day we couldn't make payroll in 2014 and had to furlough the entire company, only to find that everybody came back to work the next day because they wanted to come. I share some of the adversity we've been through. We were sued by a much, much larger competitor very, very early on our days and we fought back and really went through a lot, a whole lot of blood, sweat and tears to get through that. And I share that experience with them so that they understand what's driving the founders and what we've done to get us to this point.

Once we've established that baseline, it really becomes, "And here's how we operate." At its forefront, these are the five core values. When questions arise, how should I proceed here? Lean back on those values, number one. From the HR perspective this is why respect is so important. All right? We've got a disagreement between a manager and a report. All right, we have to make sure that we are starting from a place of respect there. This is not a culture that relies too heavily on positions. You know, we don't look at the org chart to solve problems. No one would ever say, "Well, because I am chief people officer, I'm going to handle it this way." It's always very much through the lens of, okay, we're both Precisioners, where are we trying to get and what can we do to get there?



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**Dave:** Excellent. You know, I follow somebody on LinkedIn, her name's Siobhan McHale and she's the CHRO of Dulux out in Australia actually, and I think she writes really well about culture. And one of the things she writes emphatically about is that you can measure culture inside of an organization. And it sounds like you're doing some of those things already. I just wanted to get your reaction to that. What do you think about that? Can you measure culture?

**Mike:** So I think that's clearly the way of the future. I would say right now that's something we're not doing a lot of. We've kind of done some of the standard surveys to get a pulse on things.

**Dave:** Like engagement type stuff? Yeah.

**Mike:** Yeah.

**Dave:** Well, that is, that's a measure for sure.

**Mike:** Sure, sure. It's a measure. I guess I'm thinking kind of the next level of real people data analytics, which I'd love to get into. I know Andy Porter is big on this.

**Dave:** Oh, absolutely. Yes.

**Mike:** He had a great talk. And so I think that's clearly the way of the future. I think what's most important about that is understanding why you're collecting the data and what you're going to do with it, right? Because if you're just collecting it, following it, it doesn't really help. I think if you're using it appropriately, and even then you have to be careful about how are you using it.

When we look at some of the survey results, we have to think about what initiatives might come out of that based on just because people in the company want it, or because they want it and it's in the best interest of the company. Right? So I think for me, collecting the data, and we're not doing a great job of it, but could be the easy part. It's much more about then what do you do with them? But from a, from a science-based company, I feel like that's just an incredible tool to have because it also reinforces the way we do things

**Dave:** Right. You can measure creativity potentially, or innovation and things like that.

**Mike:** Yeah, yeah. Absolutely. And it also becomes more and more important as, as we grow. You know, when you've got a 25 person company, you've got a good feel on how everybody operates and you don't necessarily need that data collection because you see it every day. But at 150, 200 people, you lose that pulse. And so I feel like if you're not putting some thought into how you actually collect data and what you do with it, you're going to be missing out a lot.

**Dave:** So, Mike, now that you're growing, you're going to hundreds of employees quickly here, how does somebody that's never led HR build an HR team? I imagine you have staff now. Can you tell us a little bit about how you built your team and what you're doing with that team?



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**Mike:** I do. I have a great team. I've got a director of HR, I've got two generalists and two recruiters. We just hired our second one because of the growth. And the way I've done it was, number one, by being brutally honest with them when I was interviewing and recruiting and saying, "I don't know what I'm doing. I've got some great ideas. Can you help me?" And being very clear what my expectations were. And I remember in the interview I had with Cindy Doyle, our director, I told her, I said, "What I'm looking for is for someone that when I say, 'I hate our handbook, I want to set it on fire.' She says, great, I've got a lighter and I've got some ideas."

So, you know, by being very clear with the expectation, I was able to find people that get it. They understand the vision, they understand that we're trying to experiment here, and they want to be a part of it. And they understand that their experience is absolutely crucial because there's some things that of course just kind of have to be done, but understanding that the experiences they bring are tools and techniques. Just like in lab, that we can pick and choose from to solve the questions in the best way to serve the company.

**Dave:** So you look at HR as a scientist, and you want your HR people to do that as well, in turn.

**Mike:** I do, I do. I view a HR initiatives very much the same way I did running research groups, which is, here's the problem we're trying to solve, or here is the product we're trying to make. Let's take an inventory of the tools and techniques we have. And in the case of HR it's our past experiences, it's best practices, it's federal and state guidelines. Let's take these tools, take these techniques and figure out how to use them in the best way to get us where we're going. And rarely is the answer, well last time I did it this way, just like in lab, no one would ever say, "Well, six years ago I tried this technique and it worked." That, you know, you might as well ... I mean, you're working with ancient technology at the point.

**Dave:** Right. Right. It solves a different problem, right?

**Mike:** Absolutely. So I challenge the HR team all the time to, all right, how can we creatively solve this problem? Let's take our experience, take our past roles and figure out what's going to work here.

**Dave:** We talked a little bit before, I started off talking about the connection between Raleigh and Boston, what's the ecosystem here with regard to biotech talent here in the Raleigh market? Can you talk a little bit about what's going on here? Why it's exciting to be in this market right now in this area? In this industry?

**Mike:** Yeah. So I will preface this by saying that Precision's actually in Durham.

**Dave:** Oh yes. I meant RTP. I'm sorry.

**Mike:** Understood. Durham is very fiercely protective of being Durham and not Raleigh.

**Dave:** Yes. And it's a very different feel here obviously, all the brick buildings, all the tobacco buildings that we're sitting in right here, so I apologize. I apologize.



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**Mike:** For our Durham audiences I had to say something. And actually as a Durham native, I also had to speak up. It's a great market. And you touched on this briefly. I think there are a lot of parallels with Boston, Cambridge area. We've got a number of great institutions, academic institutions, between Duke, UNC, North Carolina State, smaller ones, North Carolina Central, right around the corner from us. So we've got this incredible collection of great academic minds. There have also been, at Research Triangle Park, a number of large Pharma over the year that have spun out a lot of small biotechs generally. So between spin-outs from universities and spin-outs from some of the larger Pharma, and of course the large Pharma themselves, we've got a really rich environment with some great scientist and engineer and problem solvers that have a lot of interest in doing some great, great work.

**Dave:** Excellent.

**Mike:** It's interesting. This has become more and more of a hotbed I think for biotech, a lot of which I think comes down to quality of life. You know, what we do have here that Boston can't offer, is much more pleasant winters, much shorter commutes, and more affordable real estate. The price we pay for our beautiful historic tobacco warehouse per square foot is a fraction of what it costs in Kendall Square.

**Dave:** Yes, Kendall Square is out of sight right now.

Mike, we deliver this podcast in cooperation with NEHRA, the Northeast Human Resources Association, and they have a young professionals group within it, and we always ask a question on the podcast to our guests from a member of NEHRA YP. And this question is, do you still see there's a strong need in HR for some of the traditional training that, you know, like the SHRM Certifications and the PHR? Just what's your comment and your answer to that NEHRA YP question.

**Mike:** That's a great question, and I think that classical training and those certifications are incredibly valuable. As I reflect on my team, as I told you, I needed people that could help me actually accomplish the things we want to do. And without enough of that classical training, if you will, somebody like me is going to get into trouble. It's interesting. I've actually considered, should I be SHRM certified? And I think for me, probably not, because you know, what I do bring is out of the box thinking that that doesn't necessarily align to things that are best practices or even necessarily compliant.

So, having people that know that and can say, "Great idea, here are the parameters in which we need to work," is of great importance. At Precision we're very interested in professional development. We know that's important for people's career development. So even folks on my team that don't have SHRM certification, I'm encouraging them to go ahead and do that, to pick that up, to bring in that expertise and have that development. Plus people have a network of other people that have that experience.

**Dave:** Profession development. Right.

**Mike:** Absolutely.

**Dave:** I think about your role and it must bring some great advantages as you're leading the HR function. And I'm thinking about the advantages you have over your peers that are CHROs that haven't had the



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science background. Like when you're in discussions, you can stay right up to speed with the scientific conversation that's going on. Can you talk about how it's helped you in this function, being a scientist having sat in their chairs as well?

**Mike:** So sometimes I feel a little guilty about it, and at LEAPHR...

**Dave:** Guilty?

**Mike:** Well, I do. At LEAP HR we talked about this in a round table session that I led. I would say the biggest advantage I had was instant credibility with the rest of the leadership team and the company, right? I never had to worry about HR seeing me as a bolt on function because they knew me, they knew how I contributed to the team. They knew how I would continue. So from the moment I took the role, nobody ever thought, oh, here comes HR. It was always, "Oh, here comes Mike. This is going to be neat." So. So the fact that I've had instant credibility is very, very helpful. Then practically, day to day conversations are very different. You know, when we're having ...

For instance, this year we did a compensation analysis. It's one thing to have those numbers and to have done compensation projects at other companies, but to have occupied several seats within there and hired people along those lines. The compensation is just very, very different. When we're talking with hiring managers about the difference between a research associate and a scientist, I know it firsthand, and I can talk about it very, very differently. I think the other advantage I have in terms of really integrating the HR strategy with the business strategy, is not having to play catch up there. That not only am I aware of the business strategy and the scientific strategy, I'm still contributing to that as well as the HR. So it's even, it's beyond partnering with and really truly merging. And to be fair, I'm grateful for our CEO to understand the importance of that. And still having me on the leadership team, and still having me on scientific discussions, and utilizing that background through the lens of how does this apply to our people strategy?

**Dave:** Are there any disadvantages to not being a traditional HR person?

**Mike:** Absolutely. And truthfully, I think one of the biggest disadvantages is the exact counterpoint to credibility. Because people know me and they know what I've done from a scientific point, they also still sort of see me where I was. So when it's useful for me to have instant credibility, it's great. When I have to deliver news or a policy or something that doesn't necessarily resonate with the scientific staff, they then quickly revert. "But you're Mike. You used to be at the bench with us." So I think for some people, particularly folks that have been here for a long time, it can be challenging at times to see me in a different role.

So it's kind of the flip side of the same coin. It's an instant in, but then when I use that to do something that they're not necessarily 100 percent on board with, it's very disorienting.

**Dave:** I could see that being a challenge at times. But overall, it's obviously very great for the company and you.



## Keystone Partners

Mike, one of the questions I'd like to ask on the podcast is, if you could write a letter of advice to your 30-year-old self, what would you write?

**Mike:** I think for me, what I would tell 30-year-old Mike would be to get more comfortable in my own skin faster. I feel like ... And not just 30-year-old Mike, but maybe anybody earlier in their career, you know, there's this tentativeness about really just owning who I am, how I can contribute, what I can bring to the table. And some of it's just uncertainty. Some of it is fear, some of it is not having the voice to do so. So I think I would tell myself, "Own it. You know who you are. Be that, and it's going to be okay."

**Dave:** Good advice. Well, now we have the lighter questions of the podcast, Mike. We try to end on a light note. While we talked about performances early on, you were in the music business and I ask this question too, and I was wondering what's the best performance you've ever seen? Music, sports, a show. What comes to mind?

**Mike:** There's a classical guitar player named Norbert Kraft that I saw in maybe 1993, '94, a long time ago, and I still think about his performance almost every week.

**Dave:** Every week. He must have been great.

**Mike:** Well, and the irony is, the reason I remember it is because he messed up. I think it was his last piece, I think it was a Villa-Lobos Étude. This kind of Flamenco inspired guitar, blazing fast, and he was playing at absolutely breakneck speed. It was like when you see little kids running and you know their limbs are going to go. Everybody in the concert was on the edge of their seat because he was playing it so fast and it was exhilarating. And it ends with this long run to this huge chord at the end. And I mean just exhilarating. And he missed the chord. He was half a step too high on everything, and he just kind of smiled a little bit and readjusted his hand to play the right chord. But what stands out to me is that guy went for it.

I mean he went for it, totally all in, and he missed, but it was spectacular. I almost liked it better that way. I think about that so often because I feel like that's ... You talk about advice for your 30 year old. Go for it.

**Dave:** Right.

**Mike:** Get all in there.

**Dave:** Well, he certainly was.

**Mike:** And you might miss every once in a while, but it's certainly going to be a performance nobody's going to miss.

**Dave:** Wow. That's a great story. If you could go to dinner with any living person, who would it be?



# Keystone Partners

**Mike:** I might have given this away earlier when I referred to the movie Rampage. I am a huge fan of The Rock, and I would love to eat dinner with The Rock.

**Dave:** What do you think that conversation would be like?

**Mike:** I think it'd be mostly about how much he was actually eating. I don't know if you follow him, but he strikes me as one of those guys that just brings an outrageous amount of positivity and hard work and dedication and humor. I just, I love that guy.

**Dave:** That's awesome.

**Mike:** I'm a fan.

**Dave:** Mike, it's been so great having you on the podcast. Thanks for having me here in Durham. Not Raleigh.

**Mike:** Pleasure. Thanks for coming.

**Dave:** All right.

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