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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. We have a four-part series of podcasts coming to you following the NEHRA Conference. The first two feature fellow NEHRA board members, Cynthia Ring and Doreen Nichols and the following two are two of the keynotes from the NEHRA Conference, Margaret Spence and Tim Sackett. So we'll give you a little flavor of what you missed if you didn't make it down to the conference, or for those of you who were there, want to hear a little bit more from some of the people that participated at the conference, here's your chance. Also, there was one other keynote speaker, Shane Snow, and you can find another interview with him at Phil Strazzulla's LinkedIn profile.

And, first up is the Chief People Officer at Harvard Pilgrim Health Care, Cynthia Ring. She also happens to be Chair of the Board of NEHRA, and we interviewed Cynthia in front of a live audience, and I think you'll enjoy this far-ranging and fun interview. Next up on the podcast is Doreen Nichols, Vice President of Talent, Culture and Organizational Development at Eversource Energy.

And here's our discussion with Cynthia Ring.

Welcome back to HR Live. My name's Dave Hennessy from Keystone Partners. Also host of The Hennessy Report. We brought The Hennessy Report to the NEHRA Conference again, two years in a row. And we have another guest who happens to be Chair of the Board of NEHRA, as you know already from seeing her on stage just an hour ago. Please welcome Cynthia Ring, the Chief People Officer of Harvard Pilgrim Health Care. Cynthia, welcome to the podcast. It's good to have you on as a guest in this live audience here at the conference.

**Cynthia Ring:** Well, thank you. Glad to be here. Thank you for asking me.

**Dave:** Cynthia, we always like to start the podcast finding out a little bit about our guests, about their background before we jump into HR and their company. So as you think back in your life, was there an inflection point as you look back on it now that informed how your career developed, maybe helped lead to what you do today?

**Cynthia:** Many inflection points. And I think the one that stands out the most to me is something my father had said to me and the way that he raised us. So I'm the youngest of four and the only girl in my family, and my father never thought he could have a girl because his family was five boys. My mother had me and back in the day the fathers were not in the hospitals. So when my grandfather called him and said that it was a girl, he said, "What do I do with a girl?" That transpired into the way that he brought me up, which was he didn't know what to do with a girl. So he was like, if the boys can mow the lawn, you have to mow the lawn. If the boys can change a tire, you need to a tire.

If you can wash the dishes, they have to wash the dishes. So there was really gender agnostic behaviors in my family, and I think that that has always informed my path and my journey in my life. Whether it be



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sports that I was way too small to do...I was recruited by my seventh grade gym teacher for basketball. He was the varsity coach for high school, and he was my gym teacher in seventh grade. I was little of nothing just like I am right now. And he recruited me to play varsity basketball when I was in seventh grade. I played for six years. And so I think just having that I can be anything I want to be and you're not going to be treated any different because of your stature different than your brothers has just set a path for me to do what I do.

**Dave:** And I know that continues today because she was just sharing a story with me privately about being at a Patriots' tailgate, beating her brother in a cornhole game and then some sort of athletic jump roping competition. So it's still there.

**Cynthia:** Very competitive.

**Dave:** Well there's a lot of news. Well first news, new Chair of the Board. Congratulations.

**Cynthia:** Thank you.

**Dave:** And it's fun to serve on your board with you. And I was wondering if you could just share a little bit about why you decided to join NEHRA and take this responsibility as Chair, what your vision is for continuing the great tradition.

**Cynthia:** Yeah. Well, as we've heard all throughout this conference, the impact that NEHRA has had on our profession and different individuals within that profession. I'm hugely proud to be a part of HR and I did not start my career in HR, so...

**Dave:** What was the start, if you can do an interlude.

**Cynthia:** My starting career was general manager of Pier One Imports from Atlanta to New England. I always say that I ran a little boutique called Pier One. I did not start traditionally in HR, but I'm profoundly thankful for the practice and for the people that I've met and shaped myself as a leader. And I think NEHRA has a tremendous opportunity in front of it as it relates to what HR is today, what the future of HR can be from a business strategy perspective that we have with the CEO and the CFOs of all the companies that we lead...just an enormously important responsibility that we have to the cost of everything in our ecosystem. And so I'm very passionate about that, excited about that, and really getting the most out of our greatest asset, which is our human spirit and talents and capital within our organizations.

**Dave:** Excellent. And you mentioned that you started in general management. How does your experience in general management help you be a better HR chief people officer today? How does it inform your work now?

**Cynthia:** Yeah, I think having P&L responsibility and really having to run a business and construct teams, put teams together, hit your profit margins, everything in the business actually relates to what you do in HR. So I always say that I spend the least amount of my time doing HR work. The most amount of my



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time in this role is running the business with the CEO and the CFO. It's understanding how to leverage strategy through the talent within the organization, how to construct teams so that you get the greatest productivity, how to hold people accountable and move on. And I think coming from the business, I have an appreciation for the importance of us being able to effectively manage. The highest budget item is labor in your fringe costs. And so really understanding how to manage money, I think is an important aspect of business.

**Dave:** You have to start backwards, right? How do we make money? Let's build the team to do that. Great. Well, you have news at Harvard Pilgrim. Everybody knows that there's a merger coming with regulators, an acquisition, a merger. How would you say it Chris?

**Chris Mar:** It's a combination.

**Dave:** It's a combination! All right, thank you. Thank you for the coaching from the audience. I appreciate that. So this combination, can you talk about the value proposition and what you're excited about if it goes through, which we hope it does.

**Cynthia:** Yes, I can talk about it. We're very excited. I think it's a great opportunity for our marketplace to combine Harvard Pilgrim and Tufts Health Plan together and what that could mean for our ecosystem as it relates to health care, as it relates to access, affordability, and improvement of quality, influence on pricing within the marketplace so that we drive prices and affordability for our members, for all the constituents within that healthcare ecosystem. I think there's an enormous opportunity to take what each one of our companies does today independently, combine that, create a greater level of influence to just do more of it within the marketplace.

**Dave :** And as you talk about the combination, quickly, I may imagine many people are thinking we're bringing two cultures together. It's always a challenge, right? I'm not going to ask you to talk about that because it hasn't been approved, but could you talk about what's important to you about the values and culture at Harvard Pilgrim?

**Cynthia:** Yeah, so we're a 50-year-old company, we're steeped in our value system, our beliefs, our core beliefs as it relates to our promise to the marketplace, to our members. And so we're all about innovation. We're all about inclusion. We're all about dependability and collaboration. Those are our four pillars, and we really look to see how those stand up every day with all of our employees. Our rewards and recognition platform is really centered around our core values, and so we're looking for people to demonstrate them, live them, and then we're recognizing and appreciating for those same values in how we show up, both with each other as team members, but also how we show up in the community, what we do to provide back to the communities that we serve and all the constituents that touch the work that we do at Harvard Pilgrim.

**Dave:** Oh, there was a *Wall Street Journal* article, you and I talked about it, talking about how we thought it's right to hire for culture fit. We're always taught that and that's a good practice. How do you make sure you're not creating a homogenous culture? If we're always trying to hire people like ourselves



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through employee referrals, we can have a lot of group think or same think. I was just wondering if your thoughts on that. I think it's an interesting dilemma.

**Cynthia:** It is an interesting dilemma and if you think about HR and the evolution of it, it always used to be a conversation of fit. And so to your point though, if you're fitting what you have and you actually don't start with a base of difference, then what are you building? And so it comes down to what is your base. What have you built and how are you actually making sure that it mirrors the communities or the marketplace that you serve. So it's something that I've said for a very long time, especially on the front end of delivery of care, I spent a number of years on the front end.

And it was super, super important to always realize that as we saw patients come in and their families come in, that they come from different cultures, they have different languages, they come from different backgrounds, they have different socioeconomic situations and so really make sure that as those patients and their families came into our organization that we had a population that actually mirrored the members that we serve and I really feel that that's an important thing and if you have that baseline then fit is not a bad word. I think sometimes you say fit...

**Dave:** What is the definition of fit?

**Cynthia:** ...because if you're starting with a base of difference than you are actually are bringing in the referrals that you need to continue that innovation, to continue that difference, to continue to make sure that you have programs that are relevant and matter to all of your constituent populations.

**Dave:** There's been a lot of change with HR and you talked about it and it's much more business focused. There's also been some title changes. You're a chief people officer and I've noticed, I don't know if all of you, it seems like every new head of HR now is seeming to get the chief people officer title and Phil Strazzulla, who's on our board, does a lot of analytics. He found out that chief people officers get paid 30% more on average than chief HR officers. So I think that's interesting. And I'd like you to comment on the changing role, the changing title and what do you think this means for the future of HR.

**Cynthia:** I liked that stat and I'm going to bring it back to my boss. All kidding aside. I didn't come from HR so I don't have a marriage to that word. And I actually don't think that we manage resources that are human. I think what we're trying to do is really shape humanity in the way that we treat individuals and what they can bring to the organization. I think having the title of chief people officer to me is a broader, more descriptive title for what we do, which is to really think about how people impact our whole business. And it's not just about programs or initiatives and things that you do out of HR, but it's about your business strategy. It's about your stakeholder groups and to me it has a different connotation, a more strategic visionary connotation of mobilizing and maximizing your business through the promise of people.

**Dave:** As you know, as well as anybody, Keystone produces this podcast in cooperation with NEHRA...and NEHRA has an Emerging HR Professionals group. So look into that if you're interested and we have a question of the podcast coming from, I wonder if we have a NEHRA Emerging HR Professional here in the audience. Oh, we do. Oh, do, do you have a question?



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**Amanda Ervin:** Hi, I am an HR emerging professional. My name is Amanda. I work at 3Play Media located in Boston, Massachusetts and my title is office manager/HR assistant. Cynthia, my question for you is do you have any perspective on shifting the brand of HR? So many times individuals think HR is just hiring and firing and not the other critical areas that the function focuses on.

**Cynthia:** I think we could spend a lot of time on this question, but simply said, HR is so much more than hiring, firing, but it does seem to have that perception. For me it goes back to something we've celebrated in the last couple of days, which is, how do we bring about the best in everybody? And so that's not really about hiring or firing. It might be about the hiring part. But then what are you doing to cultivate an environment where somebody can actually bring their best talent to work so focused on development.

It's transforming people's livelihood through their journey in the organization by capitalizing on their skills they have. For me, in a perfect world, when someone says, we get this question all the time, what do you do? What is HR? What is it that you do? And people say, you hire and you fire people and I say, you know what? I transform people's lives. That's what we do. We help them realize their greatest assets. We help them realize the business strategy that they came to perform, and we give them all the tools that they need to do that. We enrich people's lives. That to me, if we could get that to be said, when someone says, what does HR do? We enrich people's lives. We help people transform their lives.

**Amanda:** I'll remember that. Thank you.

**Dave:** Thank you Amanda. We hear from Emerging HR Professionals, what are some career paths that Emerging HR Professionals should be thinking about if they want to be in your chair someday? How do you think about career pathing in the function?

**Cynthia:** Yeah, it's a really good question and I don't think it's as linear as people might think. I actually do think there continues to be a movement to really look at people who have run successful pieces of your business and might have some really good people skills as it relates to building their own teams and developing people's careers and looking at those individuals and saying what parts or functions of HR would they mobilize to be better than what it is? If you're in HR and you're thinking about trying to be in this seat, I think you really need to understand the total rewards strategy to be successful in the seat. The more financial acumen that you have, the more successful you'll be in this particular role. It doesn't mean that the other parts of HR unimportant or less important, but those are more easily learned.

Whereas if you can't speak the language of the business and you can't be investigative enough and have enough inquiry. Be curious enough, courageous enough to go into any new business, whether you've ever been in that industry before or not, and simply be vulnerable and go right up to somebody, anybody and say, tell me how every dollar flows through this company. And if that person doesn't know the answer to that question, find out somebody who does. Because the only way you're going to get in this chair is if you know that question and you know every point of disruption to that dollar bill being successfully either reinvested in your company, your marketplace, your community or your people. And so you got to know all your expenses, everything that comes in and know all of the major disruption points so that when you're doing anything from a human capital perspective, it's with the line of sight of



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mitigating the disruption and the drain on the expenses and capitalizing, enhancing and maximizing the profitability because you understand how money flows through.

Carlos [Echalar] shared with me earlier today that – a fellow board member and biker and college football fan – that there was a situation in his company where there was an IT problem today. And I think if you asked an HR assistant or someone younger in their career, because it doesn't mean age, it just means hasn't been in other parts of HR. You ask them, does that matter to you? And most of them might say, no, because I'm not in IT. It doesn't matter to me at all.

But in my business, that matters to me because if there's an IT problem, it means we're not paying claims. If we're not paying claims, we're not making money. If we're not making money, we're not reinvesting in our people, our community, our marketplace, and everything that our business does. So even though I have nothing to do with Deborah Norton's world of IT, when there's an IT problem, my alerts go off and I say, how do I support that team? What is it that we need to do? How do I alleviate that problem for the organization? Because that's got to be our contribution as HR professionals to understand that that was a disruption to the flow of money into our company.

**Dave:** A question we ask, this is the only question we ask on every single episode and it's if you could write a letter of career advice or professional advice or any advice to your 25- or 30-year-old self. So it's more personal. What would you write to Cynthia?

**Cynthia:** It's a really good question and I did think about it and it's tricky because I think there's so many things I would write. I think it would be a novel.

**Dave:** Well we only have about another half hour or an hour.

**Cynthia:** I think a couple things, lessons I would say is be true to yourself and be comfortable with yourself. Because when I was 25 I wasn't. And be present is another; and when I was 25 I was not. And I think the other is to really guard the things that matter to you. I see myself as somebody who has very strong convictions to the things that I'm passionate about. So that's never been a question. But putting yourself first. One of the things I did not understand or appreciate or really even know when I was 25 is if you don't take the oxygen mask, if you're sitting in an airplane and that thing drops down and you don't put that oxygen mask on yourself first, you're no good for anyone else.

So, the biggest thing that I would write in that letter is understand what you need to do for yourself in order to serve others. Because when you're 25 and you're just running to the next thing and you're looking at everybody else who's achieved where you're trying to go, the last thing that you do is put that mask on for yourself. And the first thing that you give up is that personal time, is the mask for yourself. And what you don't realize is you're in your own way because you're running and you're going nowhere because you didn't do the mask first. So if I could go back, it would be that lesson.

**Dave:** Well that leads to my next question because you're chair of the board of NEHRA, you lead a chief people officer at Harvard Pilgrim. You have a young family. I understand you get up at 4:30 AM every



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day and work out. So how do you balance all these things? How do you keep the mask on you? What gives you energy?

**Cynthia:** Yeah, you know, I think what gives me energy is my family and I think there is just an inner energy of, and maybe that's again always trying to be as good as my brothers or being able to do what my family can do. So I'm driven in a way that sometimes it's healthy and sometimes isn't if I'm being honest, but the things that give me energy are being outside, anything to do with not being in a building, if I can just see the skies. But just that appreciation for the things around you. I live in the middle of nowhere. I see big turtles go across the street every day, blocks of turkeys, deer, rabbits, cows in my backyard, horses in my backyard that are not mine by the way. They're just moseying from the farm down the street into my backyard.

When I'm driving, and I have a long commute, the thing that gives me the most joy is when something in nature I can see. My kids get so annoyed with me and so does my husband because I will pull over on the side of the street when you shouldn't be pulling over where I'm pulling over just because I saw something that I just want to take 30 seconds more to appreciate the beauty of that. I've always been like that. I don't know if it has to do with growing up in the woods and my father coming from a farm life. But that gives me energy, that little glimpse of happiness, like the rabbit just running past the car and hope to goodness I don't squish it is really what gives me energy to make it through my day.

**Dave:** What's a book that changed your life?

**Cynthia:** Easy. *Shackleton's Way*. If you haven't read it, I highly encourage you to read it. It is one of the greatest leadership books. I read it when I was in my undergrad program and I just fell in love with the inspirational story of being trapped in Antarctica for two years.

**Dave:** At least you're outside.

**Cynthia:** Yes, you're outside. There was not a lot of trees, but it's just an amazing survival story, an amazing team story and amazing grit and all the things that I just think are inspirational about what we do every day to make things work and to survive and thrive.

**Dave:** Thank you so much for being a guest on the podcast.

**Cynthia:** Thank you very much.

**Dave:** Thank you so much for being a guest.

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