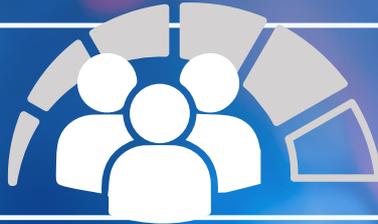




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PEOPLE AND PERFORMANCE SERIES

SEEING THE BIGGER PICTURE

From driving the company's Vision 2030 to embedding a 'Kabegoe' culture of 'overcoming barriers', Kyowa Kirin Chief People Officer and Global Human Resources Head, **Shoko Itagaki**, shares with Criticaleye Senior Editor **Bridgette Hall** how she is aligning HR and business strategy, fostering a unified culture and developing global leadership capabilities





The Japan-based speciality pharmaceutical company, Kyowa Kirin, has an ambitious, global plan for change, and **Shoko Itagaki**, Chief People Officer (CPO) and Global Human Resources Head is playing a pivotal role in its evolution.

Kyowa Kirin recently outlined its 'Story for Vision 2030,' a strategic framework for achieving this. The aim is to focus on select areas where Kyowa Kirin can maximise its impact through innovative research, advanced modalities and strategic partnerships. The organisation believes that these changes will enhance efficiency and agility, enabling a greater impact on patient lives.

"My primary responsibility as CPO is linking business strategy with HR strategy," **Shoko** says. "We need to develop enterprise leaders who not only drive their teams' performance but contribute to the success of the company as a whole, to navigate our transition towards Vision 2030."

The company has grown to be a significant player in the global pharmaceutical landscape, with a presence across North America, Europe and Asia. It has about 5,974 employees worldwide and an annual revenue of around ¥442 billion (approximately US\$2.8 billion) as of 2023 reporting. **Shoko** took on her role in March 2024. Since joining Kyowa Kirin's parent company, Kirin Holdings, in 1995, she has built experience across regulatory, strategic planning and corporate roles.

Last year, Kyowa Kirin announced it had undertaken a significant restructuring of its Asia-Pacific operations to improve business sustainability. This included

“My primary responsibility as CPO is linking business strategy with HR strategy”

selling its mainland China operations to Hong Kong WinHealth Pharma and forming a partnership with DKSH to distribute and promote its established medicines portfolio across several APAC markets, including South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore.

Shoko acknowledges that communicating the changes has not been easy. She explains: "Making such restructuring decisions is tough for top management, and of course, as a CPO and the HR team, we played a huge role in these measures. The HR team worked hard to tell the story to our people that the business strategy aligns with our vision while providing them any kind of support we could."

"Now, we are working to identify the capabilities we need to stand out globally as the Japan-based global speciality pharma by discussing them with each function and working to secure them. We see it as a key priority to develop enterprise leaders who can lead global teams to implement our business strategy."

As Kyowa Kirin transforms its business strategy, **Shoko** describes how the HR function also needs to evolve to support the business in achieving its goals. "In Japan in particular, HR is often seen as an operational / control function. However, as our company is rapidly globalising, the HR function needs to shift to a role that drives the growth of people and organisations globally as a strategic partner and change leader. To do this, it is essential that managers are able to take ownership of talent management, with professional support from HR."

The intention is to "transform HR itself to cultivate an environment that empowers managers with autonomy and authority while building leadership skills to support their independent approach to talent management, rather than simply operate / control". She hopes that this will promote the autonomous career development of employees as talent management evolves, and says: "We have already started an open job posting system, and we are also planning to make major revisions to our personnel system in Japan soon."

High Performance

The strategic CPO is an important element of a high-performing leadership team. **Shoko** comments on how they "should highlight people and culture issues for discussion among senior leaders and non-executive directors".

She gives the example of the CEO introducing a weekly roundtable meeting of top management, outside of more formal meeting structures, to allow for discussion and debate without the immediate pressure >



of decision-making. “In this open communication system that characterises our management approach, we frequently discuss people and culture”, she explains.

Shoko's vision for HR at Kyowa Kirin centres on deepening its strengths and making changes to the areas that need improvement. This is encapsulated in the Japanese term ‘Kabegoe’. She explains: “‘Kabegoe’ is the mindset and behaviour to overcome all barriers, between people, organisations and within ourselves, that prevent us from achieving our vision.”

At Kyowa Kirin, she says that this approach, which requires that people step outside of their comfort zones, is “now being developed

globally as a driving force for the achievement of our Vision 2030”.

As for those who one day want to step into the CPO role, **Shoko** emphasises the importance of having a wider view of the business beyond functional expertise and knowledge. “In that sense, I am very grateful to my supervisor for giving me three years of experience in Corporate Planning before becoming a CPO.

“Also, whether you have HR experience or not, being open to asking for help from your colleagues is also essential, but it’s equally important to provide your own vision as CPO, aligned with the business vision / strategy. ... For example, when I took up my role as CPO, I first made it clear to the team

what I could and could not do and what I knew and didn’t know. I also always maintain an open attitude and ask for advice from the team which not only helps me but also encourages the team to think from a higher-level perspective with a broader view.”

This transparency and openness help both her and her team stay connected to the larger organisational goals and align HR strategies with executive priorities. “I make use of my experience in Corporate Planning to keep members informed of the current status of the business management and what top management is thinking, and I also always think together with the team about what input we should provide to the top management from a people and culture perspective.” ■

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