

Barbara Polk

Chief Administrative Officer

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Barbara Polk says her journey to become the Kennedy Center's top HR executive is one that few would have predicted. She recently turned that story of a dysfunctional childhood and overcoming obstacles into a business memoir, *Potential: Leveraging Your Past for the Professional and Personal Success You Deserve*. Barbara previously worked in leadership positions for the American Red Cross and the National Restaurant Association.

HOW DID YOU GET STARTED IN HR?

I began working in human resources as a recruiter. This was my first real job after college. I found recruiting to be fascinating, particularly as a new college graduate who suddenly had the ability to change someone's life with a new job opportunity. I am also extraordinarily extroverted, so meeting new people and learning about their goals or interests have always been very appealing to me.

WHAT ARE YOU PASSIONATE ABOUT IN YOUR PROFESSIONAL LIFE?

It's a transformative time for performing arts. The pandemic demonstrated the vulnerability of our industry. In the performing arts, our passion for artistic expression and audience connection creates "the show must go on" mindset. There are lots of heroic efforts, late nights and weekends. Perhaps it's "COVID clarity," but now people are really saying they want a different work experience, more balance and flexibility. People are leaving the industry. So, I'm passionate about creating a very intentional employee experience in which people feel an enhanced bond to the organization as well as an affinity for the art. I want people to feel the organization is operating in their best interest.

WHAT'S THE GREATEST CHALLENGE YOU SEE IN HR RIGHT NOW?

I think it's alignment and knowledge of our businesses. You can't really nibble on the edges of the organization anymore. HR actually has to figure out what's next. We have to be viewed as subject matter experts, advisors and coaches. We have to demonstrate business acumen. I tell the HR team at the Kennedy Center, you have to go to performances, read about performing arts trends and understand our financials. We must be ambassadors of change and help build psychological safety in our organization. This is not a career for those who do not want to engage in intellectual growth and reinvention.

WHAT'S THE BEST ADVICE YOU'VE EVER RECEIVED?

I had a boss who once saw me in a meeting struggling to find my voice. He just said, "Speak up, speak up." And I said, "Well, I'm not sure." And he said, "Nobody's sure!" I think a lot of people, particularly women and people of color, have that issue, whether it's imposter syndrome or just not wanting to say the wrong thing. That really helped me early on to understand the principles of fearless leadership and the importance of being authentic.



CASSIDY DUHON