

# What You Deserve to Know as a CPO

BY ADAM WEBER

*Lessons from 100 Hours  
of Conversations with the  
Most Misunderstood Member  
of the Executive Team*

## INTRODUCTION

# The Quiet Power of the CPO Seat



*Most people have no idea what it's like to  
sit in the Chief People Officer seat.*

You're expected to be the emotional thermostat  
of the executive team.

The bridge between operations and humanity.

The person who advocates for people, protects the business,  
and absorbs tension... without losing yourself  
in the process.

I've been there as a Chief People Officer. But I've also been on  
the other side of the table as a founder of fast-growing tech  
start-ups for over a decade.

**In 2025, I spent more than 100 hours on coaching calls with five different CPOs. All of them were leading in high-growth, high-pressure environments.**

Different companies, different teams... but the same patterns kept showing up. They didn't hire me because they were struggling. They hired me because they were carrying so much. And they needed a place to set it down.

These weren't fluffy check-ins.

They were raw, real conversations about power, purpose, and pressure.

Therapy-adjacent. Identity-shaping. Leadership-on-the-line moments.

What struck me wasn't just how complex the CPO role is, but how misunderstood it is.

CPOs are asked to hold everyone else together.

To create clarity without always having decision rights.

To protect the culture while navigating egos, politics, and shifting priorities.

To be strategic... but also available.

And still, they show up. Fully. Relentlessly. Often quietly.

Because they care. Deeply.

This book is a window into what that experience really feels like and a glimpse at how the best CPO minds are approaching the common struggles all HR leaders face.

If you're a CEO or founder, think of it as a decoder ring for one of the most critical roles on your team.

If you're a Chief People Officer, this isn't a guide written about you. It's written for you.

You'll recognize yourself in these pages.

You'll hear your voice in someone else's story.

You'll find new language for things you've felt but couldn't name.

And hopefully, you'll feel a little more seen... and a lot less alone.

*Let's get into it.*

# How to read this book

*What You Deserve to Know as a CPO* explores the CPO role across four key themes:

## ● Strategy

**Strategy** tackles the identity crisis at the heart of the role: the exhausting double standard of being expected to care the most while constantly proving you're more than "just the one who cares." This section explores how to show up like the strategic leader you are.



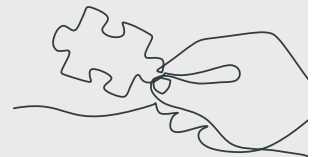
## ● Executive Team Dynamics

**Strategy** addresses the invisible labor CPOs undertake within the executive team, offering practical ways to speak up with clarity, maintain centeredness under pressure, and influence without losing yourself in the process.



## ● Culture

**Culture** reframes culture as a system rather than a "collection of vibes," and tackles the hardest challenge most CPOs face: toxic top performers who deliver results while destroying trust.




## ● Emotional Labor

**Emotional Labor** names the weight CPOs carry: the burden of secrets, overfunctioning, blurry boundaries, and quiet burnout, and offers a path toward sustainable leadership that doesn't require self-abandonment.

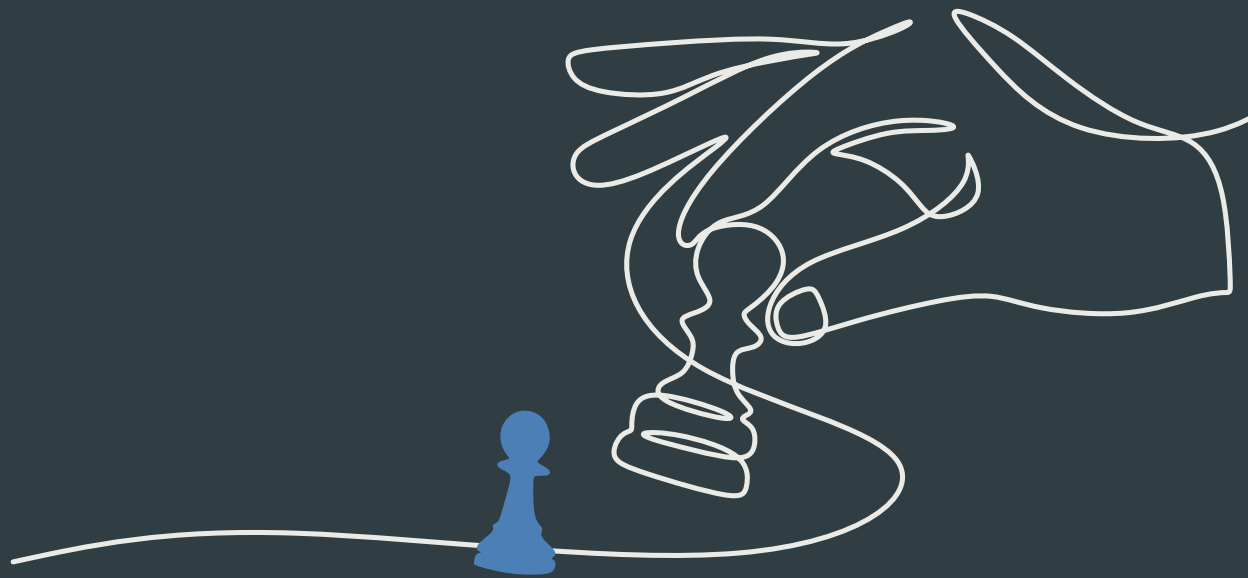


Each chapter stands alone, so feel free to start wherever you need it most. Read cover to cover, jump to what's most pressing, or share specific chapters with your CEO or executive team. This guide is designed to meet you exactly where you are.

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# The CPO as a Change-Maker



Most CPOs struggle with an invisible tension: they know they're strategic, but they're still evaluated like support staff. This section tackles the identity crisis at the heart of the role—the exhausting double standard of being expected to care the most while constantly proving you're more than “just the one who cares.”

It's about the shift from fixer to architect, from people-pleasing at scale to building systems that don't require your constant intervention.

# The Identity Crisis of the Modern CPO



*“I know I’m strategic.  
But sometimes I still feel like ‘the help.’”*

That was one of the first things a CPO said to me this year.

She had the title, the team, the seat at the table. But under the surface? She still questioned whether her voice actually carried the same weight as her executive peers.

Every other CPO I coached said some version of the same thing:

They were tired of being the moral compass *and* the emotional sponge.

Tired of holding space for everyone... while trying to be taken seriously as a strategic partner.

Tired of getting credit for nothing and responsibility for everything.

***One said, “When things go well, it’s the team. When things go wrong, it’s HR.”***

***Another: “If I push too hard, I’m seen as difficult. If I don’t push at all, I’m irrelevant.”***

That’s what makes this role so emotionally complex.

You’re constantly navigating the double standard of being expected to care the most — while proving you’re not *just* the one who cares.

You have to be strategic, but not too sharp.

Empathetic, but not too soft.

Approachable, but not too available.

And when the expectations contradict, guess who gets blamed for the tension?

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## The Double Standard No One Sees

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### Here's what most CEOs don't fully understand:

Other execs are evaluated based on results.

CPOs are often evaluated based on presence.

Are you warm enough? Approachable enough? Helpful enough?

Are you calm under pressure, even when that pressure is coming from inside the house?

*One CPO told me, "If I'm frustrated, it's a problem. If the CRO blows up, people say he's just intense."*

*Another said, "The rest of the exec team talks openly about performance and metrics. The second I bring up behavior, I get told I'm being emotional."*

This is the emotional labor no one budgets for.

And it's one of the reasons burnout in the CPO seat usually doesn't look like exhaustion.

It looks like questioning your own value.



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## From Fixer to Architect

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A turning point for many of the CPOs I worked with was this simple reframe:

Stop being the fixer. Start being the architect.

The fixer jumps in to smooth things over.

To mediate, absorb, translate, and clean up messes that aren't theirs.

The architect designs the system.

They build for sustainability.

They create clarity and accountability so problems can be solved without them being in every room.

***One CPO said, "I realized I was unintentionally enabling chaos because I kept stepping in. I wasn't helping. I was rescuing. That's not leadership."***

The more they let go of being the one who holds it all, the more they started building teams that could hold things themselves.

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## Redefining Value

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This identity crisis doesn't get solved by louder talking points or more strategic decks.

It gets solved when you anchor your value internally.

The CPOs who grew the most this year stopped waiting for permission to be strategic.

They stopped measuring success by how liked they were.

They stopped trying to convince everyone that HR matters.

### Instead, they:

- 01 Clarified their personal leadership philosophy
- 02 Stopped apologizing for making culture a business priority
- 03 Advocated for systems that didn't rely on over-functioning
- 04 Took up space like they belonged

They led like strategic executives. Because that's what they are.

# Strategic HR $\neq$ People Pleasing at Scale



*“My job isn’t to make everyone happy.  
It’s to make the company healthy.”*

That was the turning point for one of the CPOs I coached, and it reframed their entire year.

A lot of CPOs step into the role with a deeply ingrained belief that their value comes from being helpful. They’re the fixers. The translators. The ones who smooth tension and protect relationships. And those are valuable skills until they start getting mistaken for strategy.

***One CPO put it this way:  
“I realized I wasn’t being strategic.  
I was being nice at scale.”***

That line stuck with me. Because when you’re in the CPO seat, it’s easy to confuse being needed with being impactful. But the most strategic HR leaders I coached weren’t the ones constantly jumping in to help. They were the ones building systems that didn’t rely on their constant involvement.

They stopped chasing harmony and started chasing clarity. They stopped being the feedback whisperer and started teaching managers how to give feedback without them. They stopped measuring their impact by how liked they were and started measuring it by how aligned and accountable the organization was becoming.

One CPO made it her mission to shift her reputation from “the person you go to when you’re upset” to “the person who builds the systems that keep us aligned.” She started pushing her executive peers to define what great actually looked like, not just for performance, but for behavior. She tied values to promotions. She operationalized culture into onboarding and reviews. She started showing up less like a therapist and more like a builder.

That's the real work of strategic HR. It's not reactive. It's proactive. It's not about managing every fire. It's about redesigning the structure so fewer fires happen in the first place.

Being strategic means making hard calls, saying unpopular things, and advocating for consistency even when it's inconvenient. It means protecting the long-term health of the company, not just solving today's discomfort.

One of the biggest signs a CPO is stepping into strategy is when they stop trying to be everywhere and start building infrastructure that reflects their philosophy.

The best ones stopped apologizing for treating people strategy like business strategy. They weren't just there to help the business succeed. They were there to shape how it succeeds.

And they understood that pleasing everyone is a trap. Because the second you try to make everyone happy, you lose your ability to make anyone better.



*The second you try to make everyone happy, you lose your ability to make anyone better.*

# Expanding HR's Influence



CPOs don't just lead people operations and HR—they quietly coach, translate, and truth-tell for every other executive. This invisible labor becomes either your greatest source of influence or a fast track to emotional overload, depending on whether you do it consciously or by default.

This section is about owning the coaching work you're already doing, speaking up without diluting your message, and leading from a centered place that doesn't require you to prove your worth in every room.

# Coaching the Executive Team (When They Don't Know You Are)



*“I’m not just leading people.  
I’m quietly coaching every other exec.”*

This is one of the quiet truths about the CPO seat. You’re not just running people ops. You’re functioning as an unspoken coach, therapist, and truth-teller for your peers, often without a formal invitation.

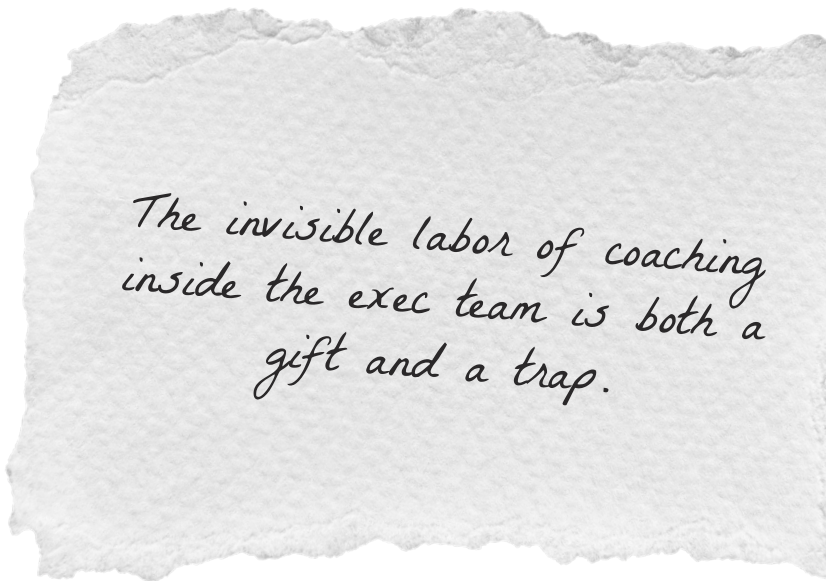
Sometimes it’s subtle. A reframe in a tense conversation. A well-placed question in a leadership meeting. A pattern you surface that no one else has named. And sometimes, it’s more direct. You’re helping the CRO repair trust with their team. You’re guiding the CTO through a tough feedback conversation. You’re translating the CEO’s urgency into something the org can actually absorb.

***One CPO said, “I realized I was coaching the entire exec team... but no one was calling it that. Not even me.”***

The tricky part is that this work rarely gets acknowledged. You’re expected to do it, but not always empowered to own it. And when it’s done well, it looks invisible. The conversation

runs smoothly. The decision gets made faster. The tension diffuses. But the credit? It often goes elsewhere.

That’s why this chapter matters. Because the invisible labor of coaching inside the exec team is both a gift and a trap. Done consciously, it’s one of your greatest sources of influence. Done unconsciously, it becomes emotional overload.

A piece of white paper with a torn, deckled edge, containing handwritten text in a cursive script.

*The invisible labor of coaching  
inside the exec team is both a  
gift and a trap.*

## The CPOs I worked with who navigated this best did two things really well:

**01** They embraced the coaching part of their role. Not as something extra, but as a core part of how they shaped the organization.

**02** They built boundaries around it. They stopped coaching in the margins and started building it into how the team operated.

One CPO created a “how we lead together” operating model for the exec team, including expectations around feedback, conflict, and emotional ownership.

Another started asking execs to name their growth edges out loud, not just in private 1:1s, but in group settings.

Another began each leadership meeting with a two-minute pulse check, not as fluff, but as a way to train the team to self-regulate before diving into strategy.

The result? Less emotional leakage. More intentional leadership. Fewer toxic dynamics falling to the CPO to privately clean up.

When you accept that you’re coaching the exec team, even if they don’t call it that, you start looking at your role differently. You’re not just keeping the culture aligned. You’re developing the people who shape it most.

And the better you get at doing that with intention, the less energy you’ll spend carrying dysfunction that doesn’t belong to you.





## CHAPTER 4

# Speaking Up Without Burning Out

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*“I want to advocate for what matters.  
But I don't want to get steamrolled or dismissed.”*

Every CPO I worked with this year shared some version of that tension. You're expected to speak truth to power, to be the voice of accountability, to raise hard issues but do it in a way that's calm, approachable, and easy to digest. And when your insights are about people, behavior, or values, the risk of being labeled emotional or reactive only increases.

***One CPO described it like this: “If I bring up something product-related,***

***it's strategic. If I bring up something cultural, it's personal.”***

So what do most CPOs do? They over-prepare. They build the perfect case. They preface and soften and hedge and reframe. And by the time they speak up, the message has been so diluted that it doesn't land.

This chapter is about what happens when you stop doing that.

One CPO I coached had spent weeks debating whether to speak up about a toxic exec who was protected by the CEO. Her first instinct was to write a bulletproof email, full of examples, research, and stakeholder quotes. But we paused. And instead, she got clear on one sentence:

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*“We are normalizing behavior that violates the culture we say we care about.”*

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She said it in a meeting. Calm. Clear. No disclaimers. And then she stopped talking.

The room went silent. Not because people were offended. But because they finally heard her.

This is the shift most CPOs have to make. They’re not struggling to be understood. They’re struggling to stay in their power. The old instinct is to say more, to fill the space, to explain every angle so no one can misinterpret your intent. But the more you say, the more space you give others to distance themselves from the message.

The CPOs who grew the most this year started practicing something different. They said less, but meant more. They stopped managing other people’s emotional responses. They started anchoring themselves in what they knew to be true. And they let their clarity speak louder than their volume.

One CPO told me, “I realized I was spending all my energy trying to convince people instead of confronting reality.” That reframe changed everything. Because when you stop trying to prove that your feedback is valid, you can finally focus on the thing that matters... delivering it with clarity and conviction.

Speaking up doesn’t have to cost you your peace. In fact, the most powerful advocacy happens when you are centered, not activated. When you know what you believe, why it matters, and how to say it without defending it.

The goal isn’t to win every argument. It’s to stop walking out of meetings wondering why you didn’t say what you needed to say.

# The CPO's Secret Weapon: Centeredness

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*Confidence wobbles. Centering doesn't.*

That idea became a core theme in nearly every coaching conversation I had with CPOs this year. Especially for those working in product-led, hypergrowth, highly analytical environments... where your voice isn't just under a microscope, it's often undervalued by default.

***One CPO told me, "Sometimes I feel like I have to say something brilliant every time I open my mouth. Like I'm constantly proving I deserve to be in the room."***

He wasn't alone. So many of the CPOs I worked with felt pressure to show up perfectly. To be crisp. Strategic. Unflappable. At all times. Because if they weren't, they feared they'd be written off as soft or less than.

But the leaders who made the biggest shift didn't get louder. They got steadier. They didn't try to match the intensity in the room. They anchored themselves and let their presence do the talking.

***One said, "I realized I don't need to dominate the meeting. I just need the room to get quieter when I speak." And that's exactly what started happening. Not because they demanded authority. But because they embodied it.***

That's the power of centeredness. It's not about being calm all the time. It's about being clear on who you are, what you're here to say, and what actually matters. It's the difference between performing confidence and actually being grounded.

Most of the CPOs I worked with didn't start out that way. They were reactive, often in ways they couldn't see. They'd leave meetings over-explaining. They'd write long emails trying to manage every possible interpretation. They'd prepare a 10-point case for why their point of view deserved to be heard and still feel dismissed.

## The breakthrough came when they stopped trying to win influence and started trusting their presence.

They practiced breathing before key meetings. They created personal cues to reconnect with themselves in real time. They named their own emotional patterns so they could choose their response instead of defaulting to old ones.

One CPO had a simple rule before every exec meeting: pause, two breaths, ask herself what she most needed to remember. That 10-second ritual helped her speak from her center instead of her stress.

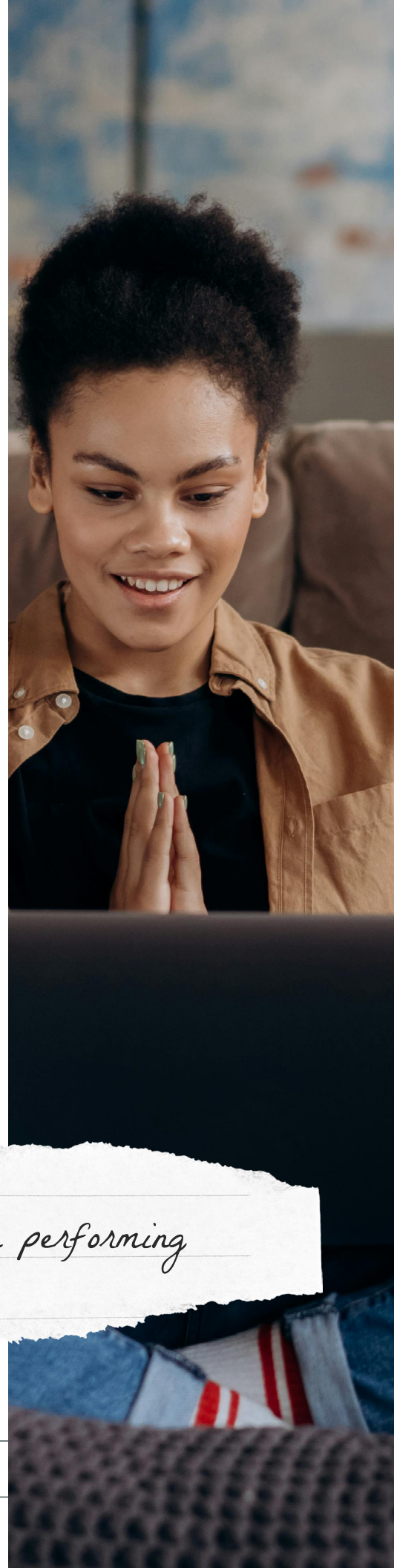
Another began paying attention to the moment when she felt the urge to prove something. That was her signal to slow down. When she resisted that urge, she noticed her peers started listening more... not less.

The secret isn't to sound more like the CFO or CRO. It's to sound more like yourself, anchored in what only you can see. The systems, the dynamics, the signals that others ignore.

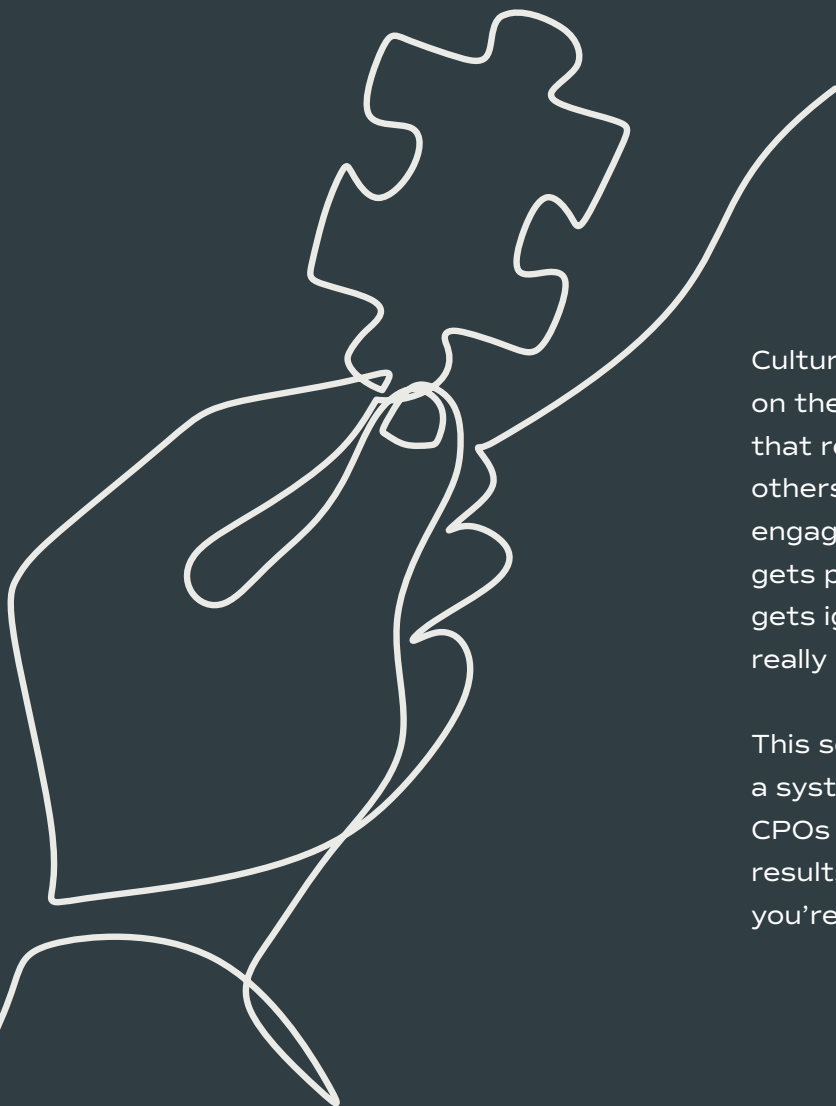
When you're centered, you don't need to prove your value.

You embody it. And the more grounded you are, the more others will naturally follow your lead... even if they don't understand exactly why.

*Centeredness: It's the difference between performing confidence and actually being grounded.*



# A System of Behaviors



Culture isn't about perks, vibes, or values on the wall—it's a system of reinforcement that rewards certain behaviors and tolerates others. The moment you stop chasing engagement scores and start examining who gets promoted, who gets protected, and what gets ignored, you'll see your culture for what it really is.

This section is about operationalizing culture as a system and confronting the biggest challenge CPOs face: toxic top performers who deliver results while quietly destroying everything you're trying to build.

# Culture Isn't a Vibe. It's a System.



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*“I used to think culture was a reflection of leadership. Now I know it's a reflection of what leadership tolerates.”*

Every CPO I coached had a turning point like this. At some point, they stopped chasing engagement scores and started seeing culture for what it really is: not a vibe, not a brand, not a motivational quote on the wall. Culture = a system. A system made up of expectations, feedback loops, incentives, consequences, rituals, and decisions.

One CPO came into coaching frustrated that no matter how many culture initiatives she launched, her team still felt chaotic. They had inspiring values on the wall. They ran a well-liked all-hands. But underneath it all was this

uneasy truth: the people doing the most damage were still being rewarded. Not directly, of course. But by being left alone. Promoted. Avoided. Deferred to.

***She told me, “It finally hit me that the culture was working perfectly, just not in the way I wanted. It was rewarding the wrong behaviors.”***

That insight shaped how every other CPO I worked with began approaching culture. Instead of trying to change how people *felt*, they started changing what the system *reinforced*.

**Your culture is not defined by what you say. It's defined by who gets promoted, who gets protected, what gets ignored in meetings, and how consistently the values get applied when pressure hits.**

When culture is reduced to perks and vibes, the system becomes invisible. And when the system is invisible, the dysfunction is inevitable.

One CPO shared that after years of hosting trainings, launching programs, and trying to “champion” values, they finally had the hard conversation: “Our exec team says all the right things, but we don’t actually reward people for doing them. And if you don’t reward it, it’s not a value. It’s a performance.”

The hardest shift is realizing that good intentions aren’t enough. Your culture is never better than your least-accountable team. And unless those accountability mechanisms are built into your systems, how you hire, promote, fire, develop, and meet... you’ll keep spinning in circles.

We talked a lot this year about the idea of operationalizing culture. Moving it from something you *influence* to something you *own*. Creating clarity around how the people side of the business integrates with performance, product, and growth.

Culture is never neutral. It’s either being shaped on purpose or shaped by accident. Your job is to make sure the system isn’t betraying the story you’re trying to tell.



## CHAPTER 7

# Toxic Top Performers — The Culture Killer No One Will Touch

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*“They’re brilliant. They deliver results.  
And they’re destroying everything we’re trying to build.”*

Every Chief People Officer I coached this year had at least one of these on their executive team. The toxic top performer. The person who hits the numbers, owns a critical function, and leaves a trail of fear, dysfunction, or apathy behind them.

And the hardest part? Everyone knows it. But no one wants to deal with it.

*One CPO said, “This person has had three HR complaints, two of their direct reports quit, and somehow I’m still being asked to coach them like it’s fixable.” Another told me, “Every team they touch becomes less collaborative. But they’re close to the CEO, so it’s hands-off.”*

This is one of the most damaging patterns I see inside executive teams and one of the most emotionally exhausting for the CPO to navigate. Because while other leaders get to focus on performance metrics and KPIs, the CPO is often the only one tracking the invisible costs. Trust erosion. Team turnover. Leadership credibility. The culture-wide message that bad behavior is tolerated if results are high enough.

*The culture isn't defined by what your company values on paper. It's defined by what your leaders are allowed to get away with.*

And when one person is consistently protected despite their impact on others, the ripple effects are enormous. Teams start withholding. Managers stop enforcing values. Employees disengage. The culture becomes hollow... all the right language with none of the follow-through.

One of the most courageous moves I saw this year came from a CPO who decided to make the invisible, visible. She built a short slide deck, walked into a meeting with her CEO, and laid it out: here's this leader's business impact, here's their people impact, and here's the cost of keeping both. Not emotional, not performative, just truth.

She ended by asking, "What are we saying to the rest of the org when we let this continue?"

It landed. Slowly, but surely, it led to change.

Not every CPO has that kind of air cover. But what they do have is data, influence, and language. And when they use all three... not to attack the person, but to protect the system they become the catalyst the company didn't know it needed.

Let's be clear: this isn't about going on a witch hunt. Some top performers just need feedback and boundaries. Others need to be moved out. The point is, pretending it's not a cultural issue just because the numbers look good is a dangerous bet.

As a CPO, you may not always win this battle. But every time you name it, challenge it, and show its true cost, you reinforce something even more powerful than a quarterly target... the integrity of your culture.



CPOs typically have a large capacity for empathy, but that same strength becomes a liability when caring turns into over-functioning, rescuing, and self-abandonment. This section names the invisible weight you carry—the pattern of stepping in when you shouldn’t, the boundaries no one taught you to set, and the quiet burnout that looks like slowly losing yourself.

It’s about learning to care better, not less, and building a version of leadership that doesn’t require you to sacrifice your own humanity in the process.

# When Caring Too Much Becomes a Liability



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*“I’m tired because I’m carrying things that aren’t mine.”*

That line came up in almost every coaching conversation I had with CPOs this year. Sometimes it showed up as burnout. Other times, it showed up as resentment. But underneath it all was this pattern of over-functioning. Stepping in to fix. Holding space for everyone. Becoming the unofficial therapist, translator, and mediator... even when no one asked them to be.

At first, it looks like helpfulness. You’re filling in the gaps. You’re smoothing over the tension. You’re making things run. But over time, that kind of over-care becomes something else. It becomes control. It becomes co-dependence. It becomes a quiet belief that “if I don’t do this, no one will.”

***One CPO said, “I used to think my job was to help leaders avoid failure. But I***

***realized I was actually robbing them of the pressure they needed to grow.”***

That’s the paradox of caring deeply. Left unchecked, it turns you into the backstop for everyone else’s lack of clarity or courage. You become the emotional glue holding things together, while your boundaries start to dissolve behind the scenes.

A different CPO shared a story about repeatedly stepping in to fix a strained department dynamic. She coached the manager, smoothed things over with the team, and tried to mediate the tension. But nothing changed. Eventually, she stepped back. And guess what? The conflict surfaced in a way that forced the manager to grow up, the team to reset, and the CEO to finally see the real problem.

## There's a difference between letting people fail and letting them fall.

Most of the CPOs I worked with had to relearn that line. They had to stop rescuing and start reinforcing. They had to sit in the discomfort of not being the fixer.

The same pattern of over-functioning that shows up inside CPOs also shows up in how they build culture.

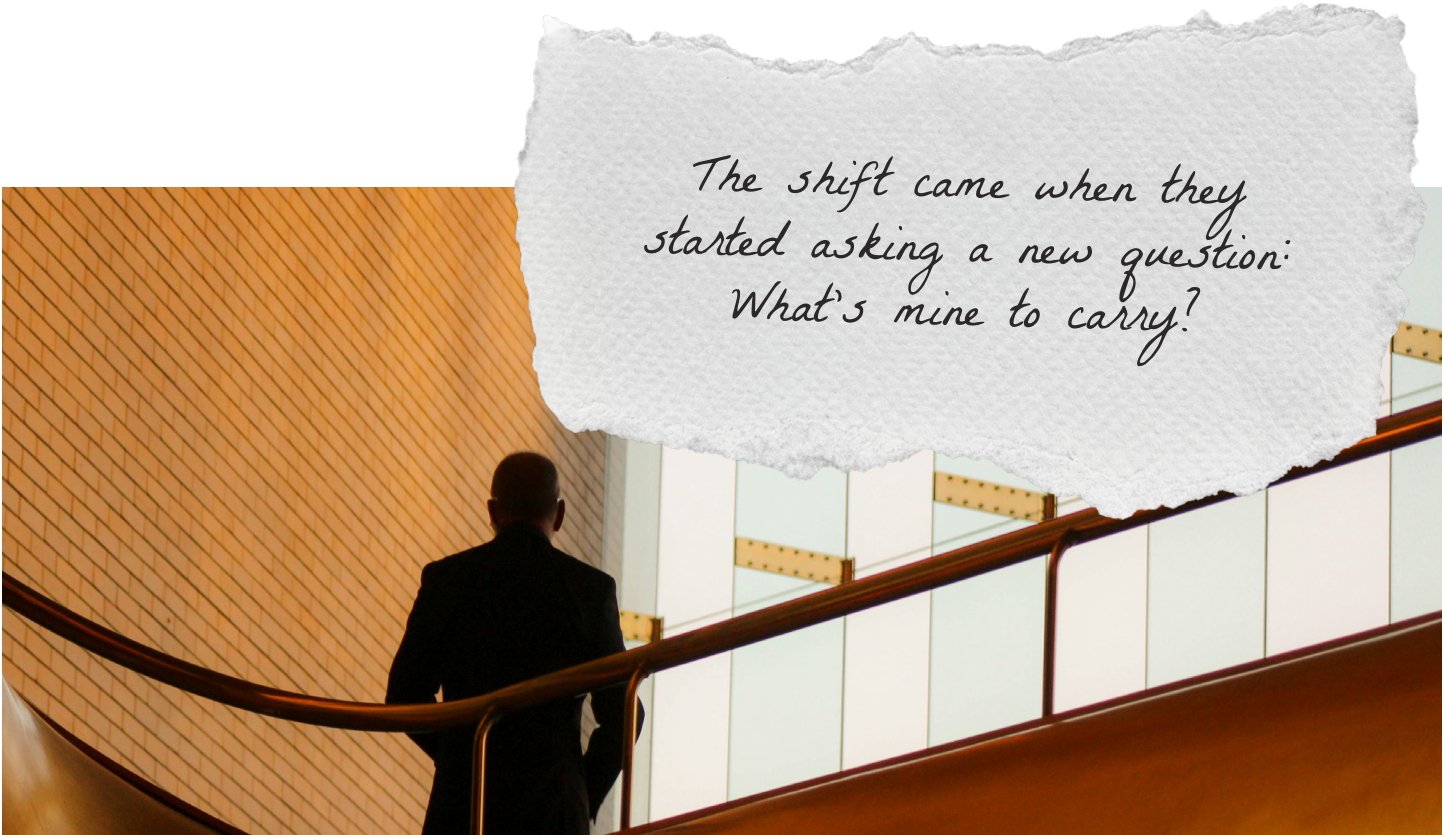
Some were unintentionally creating systems that rewarded emotional labor over real accountability. They were shielding execs from the consequences of poor leadership. They were over-delivering in a way that made it easier for others to under-deliver.

The shift came when they started asking a new question: What's mine to carry?

Not out of self-preservation. But out of respect. For themselves. For their role. And for the people they were enabling by accident.

Caring isn't the problem. It's caring in a way that confuses support with sacrifice. Empathy with enmeshment. Leadership with self-erasure.

The best CPOs I coached didn't care less. They just started caring better.



*The shift came when they started asking a new question: What's mine to carry?*

# Boundaries — The Leadership Skill No One Teaches



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*“Everyone tells me to set better boundaries.  
No one tells me how.”*

This came up in almost every coaching conversation. And not just from newer CPOs. Even seasoned execs, smart, steady, deeply self-aware, were still struggling to hold healthy boundaries in their roles.

CPOs are hired for their empathetic approach. For their ability to build trust. To hold tension. To show up for people in hard moments. But that same strength can become a trap.

Over time, the line between being available and being always available gets blurry. The desire to be supportive turns into a habit of self-abandonment. You start responding to messages

late at night, picking up emotional slack during exec meetings, agreeing to things that don't align with your priorities all in the name of being helpful.

***One CPO told me, “I realized I was teaching the org to expect things from me I never actually agreed to.”***

That's how boundary violations usually happen. Not because someone is forcing you. But because the culture rewards your over-functioning. And no one ever taught you how to protect your energy while still leading with care.

## So let's name the basics.

Boundaries are not walls. They are clarity. They define what you're responsible for and what you're not. They build consistency, not distance. And the best leaders I coached this year realized that the most respectful thing they could do for themselves and for others was to get clear on what they were actually here to carry.

One created a "what I own" and "what I support" document for her role. Another blocked off one afternoon per week for thinking and reflection and treated it like a board meeting. Another stopped being the emotional processing hub for every other exec. He still cared. He still showed up. But he no longer made other people's reactions his responsibility.

Boundaries are about sustainability. Without them, you burn out, grow resentful, or quietly check out. And when that happens, the whole company feels it. Because you can't build a culture of accountability if your own time and energy are being violated daily.

The CPOs who found their rhythm this year weren't the ones doing more. They were the ones who got sharper about what mattered, what they owned, and what they were no longer willing to absorb.

They didn't become less available. They became more powerful. Because when your energy is protected, your voice gets clearer. And when your voice gets clearer, your leadership shifts from pleasing to shaping.

*When your voice gets clearer, your leadership shifts from pleasing to shaping.*



## CHAPTER 10

# No One Wins If You Burn Out Quietly

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CPO burnout doesn't always look like collapse. It often looks like quiet disengagement. Less pushback in meetings. Fewer big ideas. More calendar blocks labeled "focus time" that never really get used.

One CPO told me, "I didn't realize how far I'd slipped until someone asked me what I was excited about, and I didn't have an answer."

It's not just the workload that leads to burnout. It's the emotional toll of constantly being the one who cares. The one who notices. The one who carries weight. The one who holds the line when others get to look away. It's fighting for culture when no one is asking for it. It's building systems of care and accountability while being left out of the conversations where real power gets exercised.

The irony? CPOs are often the last ones to ask for help. You're too competent. Too trusted. Too good at holding space for everyone else. So you put your own needs last, thinking you can push through. You overextend. You rationalize. You convince yourself it's just a busy season.

But seasons become norms. And eventually, something cracks.

***One CPO I coached said, "I was showing up for everyone except myself. And I didn't even notice, because people kept telling me how valuable I was."***

That's the danger. Your burnout is easy to miss, because your performance often stays high... until it doesn't.

The shift for many of the CPOs I worked with this year was learning to build in recovery, not just rescue.

To stop operating as if their capacity was infinite. To create space for reflection and replenishment the same way they created space for strategy and performance.

They started setting limits on their availability. They got clearer on what was truly urgent. They began advocating for their own needs the same way they advocated for the organization.

And most importantly, they stopped treating exhaustion like a badge of honor.

One even said to their CEO, “If you want me to keep caring this much about the culture, you have to care about mine too.”

**Burnout doesn't happen because you're weak. It happens because you're doing deeply human work in systems that often resist it. And the only way to sustain that kind of leadership is to stop minimizing your own humanity in the process.**

You can't carry everyone. You're not supposed to.

But you can lead with clarity. You can shape culture with intention. And you can stay in the work without losing yourself inside it.

That's the invitation now. Not just to build a better company... but to build a more sustainable version of you.

## CPOs are coaches by nature.

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But even the best coaches need someone in their corner.

Sometimes that looked like real-time support during a high-stakes decision.

Sometimes it was untangling the patterns behind their frustration.

And sometimes it was just being reminded they weren't crazy for caring as much as they do.

What made the coaching work wasn't that I had all the answers.

It was that they finally had space to think, to process, to discover the answers they already held.

They didn't have to perform.

They didn't have to translate.

They didn't have to be the emotionally regulated one holding the rest of the room together.

They got to be fully human, so they could lead more powerfully when it counted.

The truth is, most CPOs don't need more tools.

They need reflection.

They need language for what they're already sensing.

They need to hear, "You're not wrong. And here's a way to move forward."

*One told me, "I already knew what I needed to do. I just needed someone to help me trust it."*

Another said, "I leave our calls with more clarity, more calm, and less weight on my shoulders."

That's the work. Not fixing people. Not giving them a script.

But helping them return to themselves, so they can lead from their center.

Whether you're a CPO, a CEO, or somewhere in between the question isn't whether you need support. The question is whether you've created enough space to receive it.

Because your growth, your clarity, your steadiness... they don't happen by accident.

They happen when you choose to invest in your own leadership as intentionally as you invest in everyone else's.

That's what coaching does.

And for the leaders I've worked with this year... it changed everything.

# About Adam



Adam Weber is an executive coach who helps CPOs and CEOs manage pressure and sift through competing inputs to assert meaningful change and lead as their authentic selves.

Most recently, he served as 15Five's Chief Evangelist and host of the HR Superstars podcast. Previously, he co-founded and served as Chief People Officer for employee engagement software company Emplify, which 15Five acquired in 2021. In 2020, Adam was named to Business Insider's "Rising Stars in HR" list. Adam is also the author of the Amazon best-selling book, "Lead Like a Human".

Adam holds a bachelor's degree in sociology and a master's degree in organizational communication from Ball State University. He lives in Zionsville, Indiana with his wife, two sons, and dog, Poppy.

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