

Influential Women Features Vanessa Parker-Lewis, Ph.D.: Chief Human Resources Officer With McCormack Baron Companies

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Combining Operational Expertise,
Strategic Workforce Leadership, and
People-Centered Leadership to Drive
Meaningful Organizational Change

St. Louis, Missouri — Vanessa Parker-Lewis, Ph.D., Chief Human Resources Officer with McCormack Baron Companies, has built a distinguished career around the belief that organizations are strongest when their people systems, leadership practices, and business strategies work together. With more than 25 years of experience, she has led enterprise-wide organizational change, strategic workforce planning, people system optimization, and cultural transformation, consistently bringing a data-driven and people-centered perspective to complex organizational challenges.



Throughout her career, Vanessa has delivered measurable impact, including significant cost savings, improved employee retention, and successful workforce transitions during periods of disruption. Her academic and professional credentials reflect the depth of her expertise. She holds a Ph.D. in Industrial and Organizational Psychology, along with dual master's degrees in Human Resources Management and Human Resources Development. She is also a certified Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR) and SHRM-SCP.

Yet for Vanessa, professional achievement cannot be separated from the experiences that shaped her. Her leadership philosophy is deeply connected to a personal journey defined by independence, resilience, accountability, and an early understanding that choices have consequences.

At 17, Vanessa left home and became emancipated from her father and stepmother. Her early home life was difficult, and she made the decision to leave to protect her future and establish stability for herself. Her mother had passed away when Vanessa was 10, and Social Security survivor benefits in her name provided a foundation of support as she worked toward independence.

The experience profoundly influenced how Vanessa approaches life and leadership. Without traditional parental guidance, she learned to advocate for herself, conduct her own research, make thoughtful decisions, and take responsibility for the outcomes. Rather than allowing difficult circumstances to define her future, she focused on building a stable path forward.

That determination ultimately extended to her education. One of Vanessa's proudest accomplishments is financing her education through to her doctorate. The achievement represented more than academic advancement; it demonstrated her ability to establish a goal, develop a strategy, and persist despite significant obstacles.

Her early experiences cultivated a strong sense of personal accountability that remains central to her leadership approach today. Vanessa believes people are, in many ways, a sum of their choices, experienced through natural consequences. This philosophy has encouraged her to remain intentional about the decisions she makes and to recognize that growth often requires both discipline and personal responsibility.

From Frito-Lay to Human Resources Leadership

Before establishing herself in human resources, Vanessa spent nearly a decade with Frito-Lay, a period she affectionately refers to as her "chip lady" years. She began as a route salesperson and progressed into a district sales leader, gaining firsthand experience in operations, sales, frontline leadership, and the realities of managing people in a demanding business environment.

Those years provided an operational foundation that continues to influence her leadership. Vanessa learned the importance of understanding the work employees perform, listening to frontline teams, and recognizing how organizational decisions affect people at every level.

Her leadership development was also shaped by observing other leaders and learning directly from the teams she managed. At the time, she was navigating a largely male-dominated environment, which presented its own challenges and opportunities for growth. A female mentor played an especially meaningful role in her development, helping Vanessa understand corporate dynamics and encouraging her to continue her education.

After completing her dual graduate degrees and reaching the peak of her district sales performance, Vanessa transitioned into human resources. Although her career path changed, her operational mindset remained.

That perspective has become one of her differentiators as an HR leader. Rather than viewing human resources as a function operating separately from the business, Vanessa sees HR as an integral part of organizational strategy. Effective people systems, in her view, must ultimately support business performance, sustainability, and long-term organizational health.

The Willingness to Learn and Unlearn

Vanessa attributes much of her success to a willingness to both learn and unlearn. She recognizes that growth is not simply about accumulating knowledge; it also requires challenging assumptions, adjusting behaviors, and remaining open to new perspectives.

Throughout her career, she has deliberately entered uncomfortable situations because she understands that meaningful growth rarely occurs within familiar territory. Her willingness to examine her own role in difficult circumstances has also become an important part of her leadership philosophy.

One of the most influential lessons Vanessa received early in her career came from her godmother. After experiencing an especially difficult day at Frito-Lay, Vanessa described a series of conflicts and frustrations. Her godmother encouraged her to consider the common factor across each situation: Vanessa herself.

The observation prompted significant self-reflection and became a lasting lesson in personal accountability. When patterns repeatedly emerge across situations or relationships, Vanessa believes it is important to examine whether one is contributing to those patterns.

For Vanessa, introspection is valuable only when it leads to action. Understanding one's role in a situation is the first step; changing behavior based on that understanding is what creates meaningful progress.

That philosophy continues to inform how she handles organizational challenges. Rather than immediately assigning blame or looking outward for explanations, Vanessa believes leaders should have the courage to conduct a self-check, listen to differing perspectives, and make adjustments when necessary.

Encouraging Women to Embrace Discomfort

Vanessa encourages young women entering human resources and other leadership fields to remain open to learning while challenging their own assumptions, perspectives, and experiences.

She believes professional development often requires people to step into uncomfortable situations and learn how to navigate the emotions those situations create. For Vanessa, emotional awareness does not mean allowing emotion to determine direction.

She encourages professionals to build the capacity to experience emotion without permitting it

to dictate decisions. Difficult conversations, uncomfortable feedback, and challenging decisions are often necessary for individual and organizational growth.

While she recognizes that delivery matters, Vanessa also believes communication must be clear and direct. Avoiding necessary conversations because of potential reactions, whether their own or others', can ultimately limit growth.

Patience is another important part of her philosophy. Not everything develops immediately, and some of the most meaningful professional growth comes from working through challenges rather than attempting to avoid them.

Vanessa acknowledges the increasing emphasis on mental health in the workplace and considers it important. At the same time, she emphasizes tenacity, capacity building, and resilience, which she believes are rooted in both thought and action. Some of her greatest growth experiences came from circumstances that forced her to think differently, move beyond her initial instincts, listen carefully to alternate perspectives, and regroup.

Preparing Organizations for an Evolving Workforce

As organizations navigate rapid technological change, Vanessa views Artificial Intelligence (AI) not simply as a challenge but as an inflection point. She recognizes AI's ability to improve efficiency and streamline routine work, while maintaining that technology cannot replace critical thinking, sound judgment, or human connection.

Empathy, relationship-building, and nuanced decision-making remain distinctly human capabilities, and Vanessa believes organizations must understand how to preserve and strengthen those qualities while adopting new technologies.

For her, one of the more pressing issues is the talent gap emerging alongside technological advancement. As technology changes the nature of work, organizations must simultaneously evolve their skills, leadership models, and people systems.

Human Resources, she believes, has a critical responsibility to operationalize this shift and serve as a strategic challenger to the business. HR leaders must understand not only what employees need but also how talent decisions affect organizational performance and sustainability.

Retention, engagement, and burnout are among the organizational health signals requiring greater visibility. Vanessa sees HR as uniquely positioned to help leaders understand these indicators and connect them to broader business outcomes.

Leading With Courage, Candor, Integrity, and Humor

At the center of Vanessa's leadership philosophy are four values: courage, candor, integrity, and humor.

She believes courage should be used constructively to challenge the status quo and create better outcomes rather than to undermine others. She also believes genuine courage requires self-awareness. Leaders should be willing to examine themselves before challenging those around them.

Candor, when delivered with care, creates clarity and trust. Vanessa favors addressing issues directly rather than allowing problems to grow through avoidance or indirect communication. While candor may sometimes strain relationships, she believes that can be acceptable when the message is delivered respectfully and with a willingness to reconcile.

Passive-aggressive communication, she believes, can stall progress. Conversely, vulnerability and the willingness to acknowledge mistakes create opportunities for learning. No leader is perfect, and Vanessa maintains that it is difficult to grow when assumptions and perspectives cannot be challenged.

She also considers data an important tool in both professional and personal decision-making. Data provides context, helps challenge assumptions, and supports more informed choices.

Finally, Vanessa believes humor has an important place in leadership. Laughing with people rather than at them can break down barriers, relieve pressure, and create connection. Business can sometimes become overly serious, and a well-placed moment of levity can make difficult work more manageable while strengthening relationships.

For Vanessa, leadership is ultimately about more than professional credentials or organizational outcomes. It is about the willingness to learn and unlearn, the courage to examine oneself, the resilience to move through discomfort, and the discipline to turn experience into action.

Her journey from leaving home at 17 to financing her education through a doctorate and building more than two decades of leadership experience has given her a distinctive perspective on what it means to create stability, develop people, and lead through change.

Today, Vanessa Parker-Lewis continues to bring that perspective to her work as Chief Human Resources Officer with McCormack Baron Companies, combining the mindset of an operator with the expertise of a seasoned HR strategist. Her approach demonstrates that effective people leadership is not simply about managing change; it is about understanding people, challenging assumptions, strengthening systems, and creating the conditions in which both individuals and organizations can move forward.

Learn More about Vanessa Parker-Lewis:

Through her Influential Women profile, <https://influentialwomen.com/connect/vanessa-parkerlewis> or through her profile on McCormack Baron Companies, <https://www.mccormackbaron.com/our-team/vanessa-parker-lewis>

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