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THE RIPPLE EFFECT

Stories of purpose and lasting impact

Delta Dental's HR team goes from pushing papers to pushing the envelope

A human resources transformation positioned the People Organization to support a businesswide evolution.

DOES **CHANGE** HAVE TO FEEL LIKE **PULLING TEETH**?

THE SITUATION

Your dentist isn't just someone you go to twice a year to fib to about how often you floss. With the strong link between oral bacteria and a host of other health concerns, dentists can be key players in transforming overall health for the better—from preventing cardiac events to reducing the risk of Alzheimer's. But with three out of four Americans reporting barriers to accessing dental care,¹ change is needed.

As one of the country's largest providers of dental insurance, Delta Dental of California (Delta Dental) has spent nearly seven decades supporting oral health and expanding access to quality care. Leadership had ambitions to transform beyond their roots as an oral benefits provider and become a comprehensive health care company that could change the conversation around dental care and whole-person health.

From the earliest days of this business transformation, Sarah Chavarria, Delta Dental's CHRO at the time, foresaw the key role the HR department could play in helping achieve the organization's strategic goals. However, she worried that the department's current structure was holding it back. Each office location had HR managers and a few generalists, but those teams didn't coordinate across locations or have shared resources or services. This fragmentation—exacerbated by outdated processes and lagging HR technology—kept the department from reaching its full potential as a strategic business adviser. Chavarria was determined to move fast and think big.



¹ [What We Do & Who We Are | Delta Dental Foundation](#), November 2024.

THE SOLVE

Chavarria began working with Deloitte's Human Resources Transformation team to bring this vision and strategy to life through an end-to-end HR transformation. She brought on additional collaborators, including Brian Sherman, who would later become CHRO when Chavarria became Delta Dental's CEO. Together, they reimagined the organization. Everything could be questioned, prodded, poked, and looked at from new angles. What if we grouped these people operational services that sat across locations together as shared services? What if *this* process was moved over here? What if *that* process was removed entirely? What if *this* group reported to *that* leader instead?

"When you are this legacy company and you've had a personnel or HR department for a long time, you often find yourself evolving into this paper processing function," Sherman said. "When you think about things from the lens of HR transformation, it's really: How do you create strategic value for the organization? How do you help drive and shape the culture in the organization?"

The answer to all those questions? The new People Organization. With redesigned operating and service delivery models based on centers of excellence and shared services, the People Org upgraded the legacy HR department. New roles, like Organizational Effectiveness Consultants (OECs), served as trusted partners who understood the business deeply and provided consistency and flexibility in the development and delivery of talent programs. Deloitte helped define the new roles through comprehensive change management communications and a custom OEC Academy.

To truly deliver on the potential of their new strategic roles, team members needed better technology tools than the aging on-prem system that was, according to Sherman, "held together with bubblegum and duct tape." Deloitte helped implement Oracle's Human Capital Management, Talent, and Recruiting Clouds. The new systems transformed time-consuming tasks (think walking down the hall and waiting 30 minutes for an HR rep to be free and interminable stacks of physical forms piling up on coordinators' desks) into intuitive self-service solutions that free up time for more value-added work.

"With the investments we've made to automate and bring in new technology to support the organization, our leaders are spending time thinking about what the future of the organization looks like and what strategic decisions need to be made today to enable that future—and keeping our people as a central part of that design," Sherman said.

OUT WITH THE OLD AND **IN WITH THE
NEW (POSSIBILITIES)**

THE IMPACT

The combination of technology adoption, process redesign, and behavioral shifts has transformed how the People Org supports Delta Dental's strategic goals. The team isn't just pushing processes along; they're helping to push boundaries—from exploring new opportunities for AI adoption to shaping an organizational culture that encourages growth and development.

"[Our team's] ability to bring business leadership with a specialty in people has allowed the organization to really excel—with year-over-year record performance and growth opportunities—and positioned us for this pivot into a health care organization that six years ago would have been unimaginable," Sherman said.

The return on investing in people:

Coming out of the HR transformation, employee engagement scores hit an all-time high and turnover decreased significantly. As Delta Dental retains more talent (and more satisfied talent), its investments in learning and development go further as people keep their skills within the organization, grow, and thrive.

From admin to strategic adviser:

With the redesigned processes and new technology tools, leaders and employees spend less time caught up in administrative HR activities and more time delivering robust services and strategic guidance to the evolving business. As Delta Dental leads innovative research, expands community access, and shapes the conversation about the importance of oral health for overall well-being, it is supported by a culture, talent strategy, and employee experience that are healthier than ever.



WHEN YOU LEAD WITH YOUR PEOPLE,
POWERFUL THINGS FOLLOW.

LET'S CONNECT.

Do these challenges sound familiar?



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