![M1 logo]
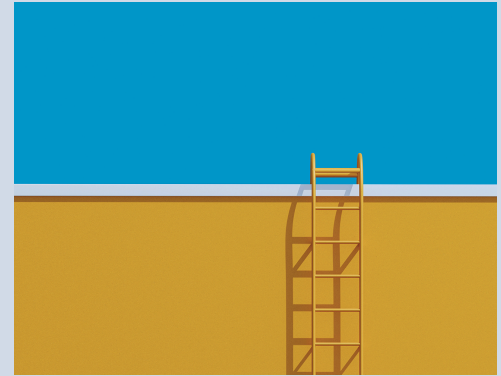
From Words to Workforce Transformation: The Power of Storytelling on Culture Change and a Solution for Skills Management

by
Jena McGregor

4 Min Read   **October 30, 2025**

At a recent M1 meeting, a CHRO had something of a ghost story to share. At her company, the HR team faced an urgent need to transform the culture, and the team knew how much a company's culture is often embedded in the words its people use. Kill usage of the word, the thinking went, and you can kill the concept—and hopefully end the behavior.

The idea the CHRO described was creative, memorable, and fun. A direct report dressed as a tombstone for an annual HR Halloween party, having people add post-it notes to the tombstone with words they wanted to eliminate. "He asked everybody to participate in his costume," the CHRO explained. "It was a really fun way to bury the behavior."

This story, shared at a recent M1 CHRO meeting, captures just one way today's people leaders are approaching transformation: With intentionality, a lot of creativity, and a recognition that culture change requires both symbolic actions and systematic strategies. Across recent M1 meetings in Boston, Paris, New York, Seattle, and Toronto, CHROs and talent leaders discussed the complex realities of skills management, the power of storytelling, and the practical mechanics of transforming how companies work.

The Language of Transformation: Communication as Strategy

Beyond killing off old words, CHROs are embracing new approaches to organizational communication. One executive lauded "smart brevity"—the Axios method of clear, direct communication that implements training for the HR function and fundamentally changed how they communicate.

The impact extended to executive team conversations. "We've gotten away from PowerPoint[s] because they're awful," the CHRO explained. With more concise

conversations and communications, it "really puts something on the table and serves up the tensions" to encourage candid, forthright discussions.

Another CHRO mentioned her organization had brought in Pixar executives to teach storytelling. Explaining the Pixar story structure helped bring to life the power of storytelling and the use of emotional twists and turns in an intentional way to drive understanding and action. As one CHRO noted, the combination of AI with frameworks like smart brevity creates a "phenomenal tool" for organizational messaging.

Skills Management: Waiting for AI to Solve an Old Problem

One of the most candid admissions from the M1 discussions centered on skills management—a challenge that has long vexed CHROs. The fundamental problem: skill taxonomies, role descriptions, and job mapping too often become outdated as soon as they're launched. "I've never seen a skill management system working in my life," one executive stated bluntly. "That is one process where I believe AI [can] really move the needle."

This CHRO said she has stopped her team from continuing to work on such skills projects for now, hoping an AI solution might eventually offer the kind of organizational X-ray that is continually updated rather than being immediately out of date. "I'm hoping or believing that there will be something that's going to solve the problem," the CHRO said. "It hasn't changed. It's just like people are working on the same topic and it's actually not moving the needle."

CHROs shared examples of being able to make a skills ontology work in one job family, but when it's extrapolated across an organization, "it becomes so complex," one CHRO said. "You kind of end up in a circular conversation. ... This is one topic where you can get extremely lost in the detail."

The Future-Ready Workforce: Who's Actually Prepared?

One participant pointed to recently released Adecco research that revealed a striking finding. When asked questions about being tech-savvy, adaptable, and proactive, some 37% of participants self-declared answers that would make them considered "future-ready."

That number has risen quickly, from just 11% the year before, and it's increasingly become a crucial question for CHROs: Do you know who these people are? How are you getting them involved? Before making decisions, are you aware of the talent landscape you have?

> 66 "Specialization in general is just going to drastically decline," one CHRO said. "It is going to become more

> **generalist, where the adaptability, the change leadership ... those types of things are going to help move organizations forward."**

Those skills of adaptability—being comfortable with change, being willing to adjust with the environment—are quickly shooting up the charts of leadership skills that really matter in an age of AI, along with humanistic traits and behaviors like judgment, empathy, and creativity. "Specialization in general is just going to drastically decline," one CHRO said. "It is going to become more generalist, where the adaptability, the change leadership ... those types of things are going to help move organizations forward. All the other stuff is going to just diminish."

The Boldness Principle: Focused Bets in Uncertain Times

In discussing workforce transformation, one CHRO emphasized a critical principle: you can't really predict the future. You must make a lot of assumptions. But you need to be bold with your assumptions and build hypotheses around them. The mistake is confusing the organization with all this planning about many small details that do not impact real action.

Instead, focus on two or three big buckets. In automotive, for instance, the shift to electric vehicles means dramatically fewer mechanical engineers needed for electric engines, one CHRO shared. If you know many of those job profiles will be gone, you can start working with those employees to build transitions. That kind of focused approach drives actual change rather than getting lost in granular planning.

Until there's an AI solution for workforce transformation, CHROs urged peers to be bold and taking targeted actions on skills—or there's the risk of getting lost in analysis. "That's a risk we see with AI right now as well. What do we do with all these people who will lose their jobs and how do we quickly move them into new roles? That is actually where the magic happens. Not in the analysis, but when you really bring people over. There is a value to finding the middle ground."