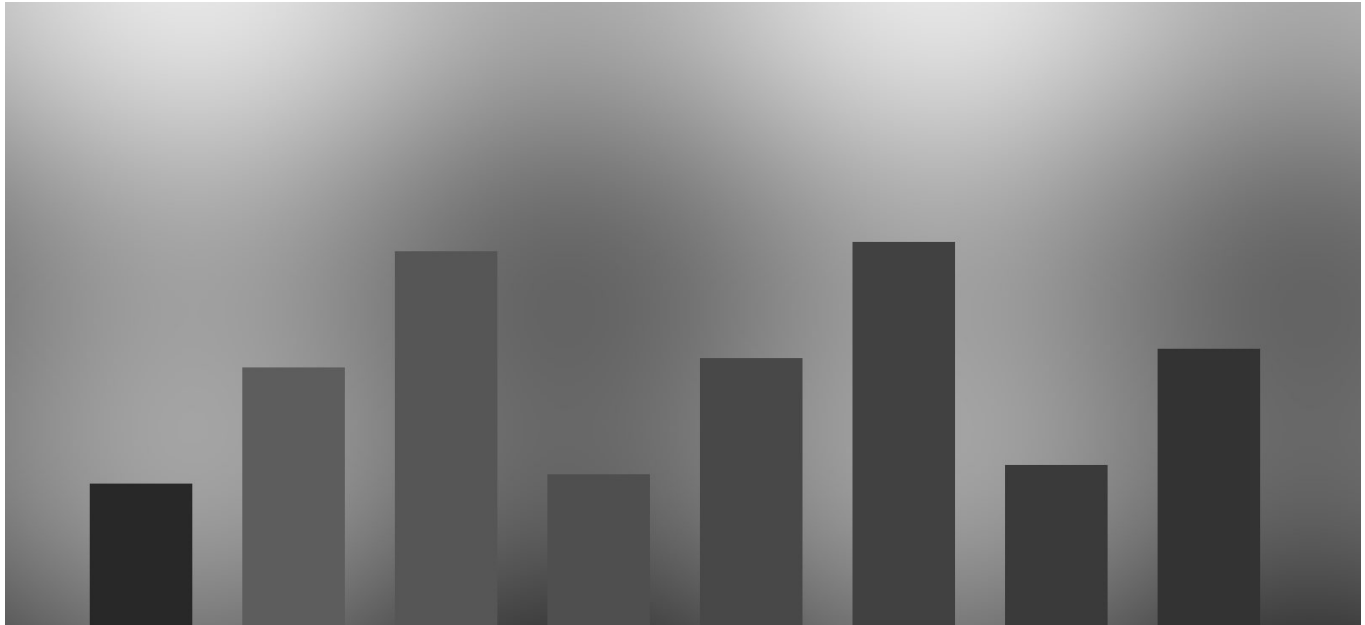


CULTURE & LEADERSHIP

How the U.S. Olympic & Paralympic Committee Repaired Its Culture

Handed a scandal-ravaged institution, Sarah Hirshland showed how a leader rebuilds trust under fire.

BY MARK THOMPSON & BYRON LOFLIN



Sarah Hirshland was asked to consider becoming CEO of the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee, an organization she once described as “a burning house.” Mark Thompson, CEO coach at Chief Executive Alliance, coached her minutes before her congressional testimony on behalf of the Olympic team, as it reeled from the worst scandal in its history.

The most harrowing systemic ethical failure in modern sports history had occurred when physician Larry Nassar, unchecked by the team for years, was found to have abused three hundred athletes. High-profile athletes including Rachael Denhollander, McKayla Maroney, Aly Raisman, and later gymnastics legend Simone Biles courageously stepped forward to say they were among Nassar’s victims.

These are hardly the circumstances most candidates imagine for their first chief executive role. Yet in today's relentlessly disruptive environment, nearly every company faces existential threats to its relevance, customer trust, and long-term growth. That is why you are being sought not just for experience, but for your readiness, willingness, and courage to lead — and even accelerate growth — through uncertainty.

LEADING THROUGH UNCERTAINTY

In the case of the Olympic team, the crisis was so severe that several seasoned candidates turned the job down, wary of inheriting a deeply damaged institution. But that is the question every executive candidate must confront: Are you ready — and is it worth it? Sarah Hirshland was, courageously willing to be a candidate in the midst of the perfect storm.

It was a burning house.

— SARAH HIRSHLAND, ON THE USOPC

For Hirshland, the real challenge wasn't just stepping into the role; it was stitching back together the torn cultural and organizational fabric of a team, a brand, and an iconic institution under attack. This was personal. As an athlete, she had grown up admiring the Olympic team as emblematic of integrity and excellence.

As news broke about the horrifying abuse, the USOPC board responded by seeking

credible advisers, appointing Susanne Lyons — a veteran financial-services executive known for helping lead the industry through the 2008 financial crisis — as interim chairman and CEO. Lyons recruited Hirshland as CEO and Thompson as her coach. Hirshland's remit was to steady the organization, repair the damage, and assure the world it would not happen again.

Hirshland saw this as a mission compelling enough to risk her own career. She was willing to take the role because she believed the organization could — and must — be saved. She was courageously willing to be a candidate in the midst of the perfect storm, and to build her credibility in all the roles she would need to play with each stakeholder.

To perform extraordinarily well as an executive candidate under pressure, you must wear multiple hats, building your credibility in every role you may need to play with each stakeholder. Hirshland clarified how the team could reignite what had been a great culture through long-term transformational change — not just to manage the fallout. That is different from the cheerleading role that former Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly called the chief energizing officer: the continuous effort every CEO must make to feed light and energy into the room.

For CHROs stepping into a culture-repair mandate, Hirshland's playbook translates into four practical moves — each designed to restore trust fast and rebuild the operating system for the long game.

STRATEGIES FOR FIXING A DAMAGED CULTURE

Build credibility first: in a damaged culture, people evaluate character and trust as much as the plan, and credibility comes from how steadily you demonstrate commitment to the customers, clients, and community the mission ultimately serves. Frame the transformation as renewal rather than crisis response, and hardwire the new standards into policy, procedure, and transparency so safety and accountability outlast any single leader.

As chief engagement officer, Hirshland gave every employee and athlete the context to play the long game — not just put out a fire. In a damaged culture, people evaluate character and trust as much as the plan, so credibility comes from how steadily you demonstrate commitment, especially to the people

you ultimately serve. As you craft your own strategic narrative, remember that you are articulating the foundational story of how everyone can engage in the change you intend to lead.

From the day she started, Hirshland kept returning to a few enduring repair moves. She stayed anchored in values while showing deep, visible commitment to stakeholders. She acted as a culture curator — honoring what was sacred and still working, and celebrating the organization's most venerable strengths with real evidence, so pride could be reclaimed without denial.

She paired that inspiration with discipline, steadfast about removing toxic vestiges while hardwiring safety and trust through clear policies, procedures, and transparency. Hirshland wasn't there to perform a quick operation; she came to reclaim and renew a legacy that deserved to flourish through sustained, focused transformation. ■

1

Build credibility. Anchor in values; show visible, consistent commitment across the full stakeholder map.

2

Lead renewal. Frame the work as long-term transformation, with a multi-year arc and sequenced priorities.

3

Mobilize a narrative. Give people a story that shows them how to participate in the repair.

4

Institutionalize trust. Hardwire safety and accountability into policy, process, and transparency.

Reprinted by permission of Harvard Business Review Press. Excerpted from CEO Ready: What You Need to Know to Earn the Job — and Keep the Job by Mark Thompson and Byron Loflin. © 2025 Mark Thompson and Byron Loflin.

Mark Thompson is chairman of Chief Executive Alliance and ranked by Fortune as the world's top CEO coach and a New York Times bestselling author.



Mark Thompson & Byron Loflin are co-authors of *CEO Ready* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2025). Scan to find the book.