

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

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Sarah Hirshland was asked to consider becoming CEO of the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee (USOPC), an organization she once described as “a burning house” in 2018. 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 its worst scandal in its history.

The most harrowing systemic ethical failure in modern sports history 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 admit 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 is facing existential threats to its relevance, customer trust, and long-term growth. That’s 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’s the question every executive candidate must confront: Are you ready—and is it worth it? Sarah Hirshland was.

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 to the shock by seeking credible advisers to represent it. The board appointed Susanne Lyons as interim chairman and CEO. Lyons is a veteran financial services executive known for helping lead the

investment industry through the financial crisis of 2008; Thompson worked with her at Charles Schwab. 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.

Hirshland was courageously willing to be a candidate in the midst of the perfect storm. To be able to perform extraordinarily well as an executive candidate under pressure, you must wear multiple hats, building your credibility in all the roles 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. This is somewhat different from the cheerleading role that former Best Buy CEO Hubert Joly called chief energizing officer. That's a critical and continuous effort that every CEO must make to feed light and energy into the room.

Checklist: 10 Questions to Ask Before You Start Your Next Executive Search [-\(<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/checklist/executive-search-10-questions-before-you-start>\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/checklist/executive-search-10-questions-before-you-start)

Strategies for Fixing a Damaged Culture

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

- **Build credibility with stakeholders by anchoring in values and showing visible, consistent commitment across the full stakeholder map.** In a damaged culture, people are evaluating character and trust as much as the plan, so credibility comes from how steadily you demonstrate commitment—especially to the people you ultimately serve (customers/clients/patients/community, depending on the organization).
- **Lead long-term transformational change by framing the work as renewal — not just crisis response.** Hirshland clarified that the objective was to reignite a great culture through sustained transformation (not merely manage fallout), and CHROs can mirror that by setting a multi-year change arc with sequenced priorities and clear expectations for progress.
- **Mobilize the organization through a strategic narrative that shows people how to participate in the repair.** As “chief engagement officer,” Hirshland provided the context for employees to play the long game, using an enduring story about how people could invest in—and reclaim—pride and value in the culture; for CHROs, this becomes the shared narrative that connects day-to-day behaviors to the culture you’re rebuilding.
- **Institutionalize safety, accountability, and trust by hardwiring new standards into policies, procedures, and transparency.** Hirshland paired cultural renewal with the disciplined work of removing toxic “vestiges” while creating the systems that ensure safety and long-term growth; CHROs can translate this into clear guardrails, transparent processes, and a psychologically safe environment where concerns and mistakes can be raised without fear.

As *chief engagement officer*, Hirshland was additionally providing the context needed for all employees and athletes to understand how to play the long game, not just put out a fire. As you craft your strategic narrative —or your activist investor letter — remember that you are articulating the foundational story of how every employee can engage in the organizational change you intend to lead.

Toolkit: How to Build a Strong Organizational Culture [-\(<https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/understanding-developing-organizational-culture>\)](https://www.shrm.org/topics-tools/tools/toolkits/understanding-developing-organizational-culture)

That's what Hirshland did. In her interview to become CEO, from the day she started, and every day after, she kept returning to a few specific, enduring cultural repair moves:

1. **She stayed anchored in values while demonstrating a deep, visible commitment to key stakeholders** — especially the “customers” of the mission and the employees who serve them.
2. **She led as a chief engagement officer**, repeatedly giving people the context and strategic narrative to play the long game, so everyone could see how to participate in the change rather than merely react to the crisis.
3. **She acted as a culture curator**, honoring what was sacred and working, and celebrating the organization’s most venerable strengths with real evidence so pride could be reclaimed without denial.
4. **She paired that inspiration with discipline** — being steadfast about removing toxic vestiges while simultaneously hardwiring safety and trust through clear policies, procedures, and transparency designed for long-term growth.

Hirshland wasn't at the United States Olympic & Paralympic Committee to perform a quick operation; she came to reclaim and renew a legacy that deserved to flourish through sustained, focused transformation.

Mark Thompson is chairman of Chief Executive Alliance and ranked by Fortune as the world's top CEO coach. He is a New York Times bestselling author of five books, including CEO Ready (Harvard Business Review, 2025) which he co-authored with Byron Loflin and from which this article was excerpted. Loflin is the global head of Board Advisory at Nasdaq and the founder and former CEO of the Center for Board Excellence (CBE), acquired by Nasdaq in 2019. He is the architect of the CBE's board assessment and advisory platform.

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