



SOUND thinking

Embracing change and striving for equity have been key to the career success of Monique Jefferson, CHRO of New York Public Radio.

By Novid Parsi

Photography by Adam Lerner



Like many people who started new jobs mid-pandemic, Monique Jefferson was onboarded remotely when she became the CHRO for New York Public Radio (NYPR) in February 2021. She used that experience to identify ways the nonprofit media organization could improve remote and hybrid work for everyone.

Under Jefferson's leadership, for instance, the HR team arranged for NYPR's health insurance provider to offer free online mental health counseling. HR also provided opportunities for employees to gather at parks and participate in ice skating events.

"Little things like that go a long way in terms of engagement," says Jefferson, who oversees a nine-member HR team serving NYPR's 350 employees and contingent workers.

The actions Jefferson took relate to two themes—change and equity—that have dominated an HR career spanning more than two decades.

"The only constant is change," she says.

When managing through change, such as the shift to remote and hybrid work, Jefferson says she leads with resilience and agility to address the three ways employees tend to respond: with acceptance, resistance or ambivalence.

She has also experienced lots of change in her own career. As an HR professional, she has worked in a variety of industries, including pharmaceuticals, wealth management, life insurance, legal services and now broadcast media.

The second central theme of Jefferson's career is her advocacy for employees at all levels, not just those at the top.

"I'm focused on not creating an organization of haves and have-nots," Jefferson says, and that involves aligning a company's values with its actions. "I always try to leave the organization better than when I arrived."



Jefferson realized early in her career that she loved HR and wanted to stay in it.

CLOSING GAPS

To identify ways to improve the organization during her first 90 days at NYPR, Jefferson conducted a listening tour and studied employee engagement data and survey results. One thing quickly became clear to her: The organization needed to focus more on career development generally and management development specifically. So, Jefferson implemented a mandatory four-session, 12-hour management training course focused on communication, coaching, inclusive leadership and productive performance feedback.

"If we start with our leaders and managers and get that right, they'll be able to lead and develop healthy, vibrant teams," she says.

Another gap Jefferson identified led her to put in place what she calls a career-leveling framework across the company. As a result, HR provides greater clarity and visibility on what employees need to do, and the skills and competencies they need to have, to advance in their careers within the organization.

Importantly, this framework dispels the idea that the only way to get ahead or earn a pay bump is by managing others.

"That's not always the best path for everybody," Jefferson says. "Some employees don't want to manage people. That might not be their strong suit." With this structure, which Jefferson has implemented twice before (at New York Life Insurance Company and law firm Hogan Lovells), "you let employees know they can be individual contributors and still advance their careers."

Plus, Jefferson has worked to ensure fair, market-rate pay for NYPR's employees—which aligns the organization with the goals of New York City's wage-transparency law, effective November 2022, requiring that all employers with at least four workers provide the minimum and maximum pay in all job listings.

Notably, in February, NYPR and labor union SAG-AFTRA settled a

long-running dispute alleging unfair labor practices. The settlement included wage increases for certain employees and the resolution of claims pertaining to individual NYPR staff members. Both parties said in a statement that they “look forward to working together to continue to resolve workplace matters cooperatively.”

Jefferson’s commitment to seeing her organization through all employees’ eyes—in short, her empathy—also means she continually considers the support staff who enable client-facing and revenue-generating employees to do their jobs.

“That’s why I focus on equity, making sure we’re fair across the board,” she says.

EQUAL OPPORTUNITY

For Jefferson, fairness also involves an intense focus on diversity, equity and inclusion (DE&I). NYPR had created a Race Equity Action Plan prior to her joining the organization. Since then, Jefferson, in close collaboration with Brenda Williams-Butts, NYPR’s senior vice president of DE&I, has helped implement many of the plan’s 19 commitments, such as securing a diverse slate of qualified candidates for every open position and reporting annually on hiring and retention rates. The organization is working on a new action plan for 2022.

Jefferson also displayed her dedication to equity at her previous employer, Hogan Lovells, which she joined in 2016. At law firms, typically only the attorneys are eligible for incentive compensation such as bonuses. But within her first six months as the head of HR for business services in the Americas, Jefferson helped develop and implement a program that extended the potential for incentive compensation to everyone, including business services staff such as paralegals and HR team members. Jefferson freed up \$2 million to fund the new incentive program.

“This was a big win for the firm,” she says. “It positioned the firm to be-

come more competitive in the market, attract more high-performing talent and increase employee engagement.”

Alaiki Harris, director of benefits and well-being at Hogan Lovells in Washington, D.C., recalls how Jefferson built a business case for broadening the incentive program and made the case to senior leadership. She attributes Jefferson’s success with that initiative not only to her leadership skills but also to her deep knowledge of both standard and best practices.

“She’s extremely knowledgeable about her field, she’s extremely persistent, and she’s very bold in her approach,” Harris says. “She also knows how to convey concepts in a professional, diplomatic way.”

While at the law firm, Jefferson noticed another disparity: The DE&I initiatives and the employee resource groups tended to serve the lawyers only. “I was quite vocal that there needed to be the same opportunities afforded to the business services staff,” she says. Right before she left for NYPR, the firm created a DE&I committee targeting those staffers’ needs.

Also under Jefferson’s leadership, the firm began offering onsite mental health counseling services to all employees a few days a week. “Being aware of and sensitive to employee health and wellness has a direct correlation to productivity,” she says.

SHOWING LEADERSHIP

Julissa Rodrigues has witnessed Jefferson’s leadership and learned from it. From 2011 to 2015, Rodrigues was supervised by Jefferson at New York Life, where Jefferson served as a senior HR business partner and reported to the CHRO. Rodrigues recalls how Jefferson adroitly collaborated with members of the executive committee during a company reorganization.

“Monique has great business acumen, and she’s a fearless leader who challenges the status quo,” says Rodrigues, now an HR business partner for Apple in New York City.

“She taught me what it takes to be fearless and always show up with facts and solutions.”

Jefferson’s intense interest in equity extends to her nonwork life. She volunteers for The Links, Incorporated, an international nonprofit that promotes service and friendship among women of African descent. Jefferson serves on the group’s youth committee, helping with a STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts and mathematics) program at a Brooklyn middle school and tutoring students as they prepare for their high school entrance exams. Jefferson also serves on the board of CALIBR, a nonprofit group that helps advance Black business leaders into senior positions.

“Both these organizations speak to my passion for helping BIPOC [Black, Indigenous and people of

color] youth and Black professionals develop and advance their careers,” she says.

Jefferson sees a direct link between how she leads and how she was raised. “I got my work ethic and competitive spirit from my parents,” she says. “They instilled confidence in me and told me I was as good as anyone else. I learned at an early age to advocate for myself and speak up, especially when I see something that’s not fair or right.”


As she grew up on Long Island, her parents emphasized the importance of education—and of making sacrifices to obtain it. Her father worked two jobs: public school teacher and administrator and, after school, recreation center director. Her mother held various positions in the U.S. Postal Service and went back to

school to get her bachelor’s degree while Jefferson was in elementary school. Later in life, Jefferson’s mother also earned a master’s degree.

“They worked so hard to provide for me but also to make sure I had things they didn’t have as children, like travel and extracurricular activities,” Jefferson says. “While I may not have spent as much time with my parents as my peers did, I never held that against them.”

After getting her undergraduate degree in accounting at Bentley University, Jefferson began working as an auditor at global accounting and consulting firm EY in the mid-1990s. She quickly realized it wasn’t a good fit. In 1998, she joined global business services and consulting company PwC as a junior HR generalist and knew she had found the right career path.

“I realized I loved HR and wanted to stay in it,” says Jefferson, who earned a master’s degree in human resource management from the New School in 2003. “I loved being able to work with leaders and employees to help solve their problems. At the end of the day, I see my job as not only minimizing risk [for the employer] but always doing what is right, whether that’s for the employee or the organization.”

Her love of HR informs the advice Jefferson now offers younger professionals. “I always tell them to find careers that align with the three P’s: purpose, passion and profession,” she says. “Being an HR leader has allowed me to do that.” 

Novid Parsi is a freelance writer based in St. Louis.

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