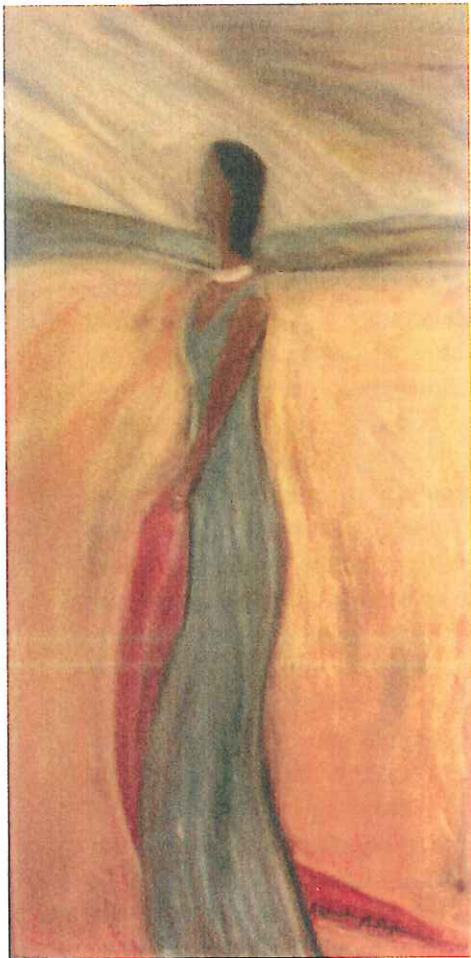


Leadership Spotlight

Nikki Jackson, Secretary, Personnel Cabinet, Commonwealth of KY



Interview conducted by Cathy Fyock, SPHR



A painting, inspired by Nikki Jackson, in Pat Gallagher's "Year of Inspiration" collection.

HR Professional Nikki Jackson, secretary for the Commonwealth's Personnel Cabinet and a member of the KYSHRM State Council, was recognized as one of the "10 Most Inspirational Women in Louisville" at the Celebrating the Power of Women event on April 23 at the Muhammad Ali Center.

Several months in the making, this exhibit was the culmination of Pat Gallagher's "Year of Inspiration" as resident artist with the center's Dreammakers Program. The art pieces inspired by these 10 women, including Nikki, were unveiled at the April 23 event, sponsored by KYSHRM's diversity initiative and led by Cathy Fyock, SPHR, of Resources Global Professionals.

Recently Cathy talked with Nikki about her role in HR and as an inspiration to women in the Commonwealth.

Cathy: Nikki, congratulations on your being named as one of the most inspirational women in Louisville! KYSHRM is very proud of you and your leadership. Tell me a little bit about this process, and how Pat Gallagher selected you as a model of inspiration.

Nikki: Cathy, thank you so much. I am so honored and so appreciative of Pat. I still can't believe that he chose to recognize me in this most amazing way. I have known him for years. In fact, he is the reason I am in Kentucky. Seven years ago, Pat was a recruiter for Humana and he recruited my husband to work there. We were living in Richmond, Virginia at the time. Pat and his wife reached out to my husband and I to help us get to know our new city.

I have known Pat to be a passionate and talented HR professional, and have watched him transform into an equally passionate and talented artist. Pat has been a huge supporter of my career and me since I have been in Kentucky. He is well aware of my great focus on meaningful work...work that is absolutely outcome and strategically focused. He has watched me practice HR in a number of organizations and do my best to focus on disciplined human capital practices for the betterment of the enterprise. That he regards me as a source of inspiration for him

is incredibly humbling. I regard myself more as an inheritor of great inspiration rather than a vessel for it.

Cathy: Tell us a little bit about your background before you were named secretary of the Personnel Cabinet.

Nikki: Immediately preceding this role, I was an HR director with Norton Healthcare. I was, by all accounts, your quintessential strategic HR type. My work experience, until now, has been in the private sector. Though I began my career practicing labor and employment law in Florida (where I hold my license), by and large, my experience has been in the area of HR, working for companies like Philip Morris, USA; Georgia-Pacific; ADP; CW Johnson Xpress; and Norton Healthcare. I began my HR work in the area of compliance, working in EEO and Affirmative Action. I did that work for years and then moved into HR Generalist/Organizational Development work. I love HR. There isn't anything else that I would rather do.

Cathy: What have been your goals in your role with the Personnel Cabinet?

Nikki: First, my overarching goal was and is to transform the practice of human resources in state government and become more disciplined about creating the right environment that encourages innovation and employee engagement to help assure Kentucky's continued growth. Toward that end, I developed *personal* goals as the HR lead for the state. I want to create a sense of trust in leadership; create a shared sense of purpose; inject a sense of levity into the workplace; and foundation our HR work around strategic outcomes.

I also want to redefine our "brand" as an employer. We have, in the public sector, for years touted our great benefits, great retirement and stability as the "draw" for working *for* us. Our brand has to shift to focus on the other, incredibly important aspects of work like fostering an environment of inclusion, creating a learning and development culture, creating solid leaders that encourage innovative thought, and creating a safe environment for employees to try and succeed as well as try and fail. That will become the "draw" that helps to court employees in working *with* us.

Cathy: What major initiatives are you involved in to help shape future leaders in state government?

Nikki: We have four enterprise-wide strategic goals that will govern our work over the next two years. They are to, 1) help the Commonwealth emerge as an employer of choice; 2) foster a learning and development culture; 3) encourage a "one-employer" mindset; 4) and assure that HR's work is much more customer-focused. These are lofty yet attainable goals. To be reached however, they must be manifested *through* leaders. Programs and services won't cut it. These goals speak to leadership behaviors and a sense of leadership discipline.

So, in our cabinet, we have launched a year-long pilot designed to do just that. We call it the "Leadership Institute." This is a year-long program that introduces the concept of a leadership model, behavior leadership frameworks, and discipline to all "people leaders"—branch managers and above—to leadership, as distinguished from management. We hope to answer these questions: What do leaders do in state government, and what is *really* expected of them?

Our hope is to espouse a common definition of what we need leaders to do and, more importantly, what we need leaders to *be*. It is so much more than just memorizing the rules and regulations that govern people practices and then executing a performance review every now and again. If we are to realize the four goals enumerated above, we have to rely on strategic leaders, at all levels, to get us there. Our hope is to roll this program out to all state leaders, beyond the Personnel Cabinet, at some point in the coming years.

Cathy: What is the most challenging aspect of being in the spotlight in human resources for the Commonwealth of Kentucky?

Nikki: Ah yes...the spotlight. I think you have absolutely captured one of the toughest parts of the role. You know, most leaders, corporate or otherwise, must effectively balance the needs, expectations and desires of many stakeholders. My balancing act is a very public one. So, not only am I "answerable" to my employees, the 33,000 + employees in our customer base, my peers, and my boss, but I am also accountable to the legislature, the other two branches of government, the press, and the public at large. My errors, as well as my successes, are public ones. It can be a little daunting at times, particularly since I am so new to this world. But, I am so thankful for a wonderfully supportive boss who is a full supporter of my work, HR in general, and our strategic focus on people. It helps to also have a well-anchored strategy, mission and vision because it is easy to reconcile our work against these doctrines, explain it, justify it (if necessary) and demonstrate the added value to the Commonwealth.

Cathy: I know you've become very involved with the KYSHRM Council. What was the impetus for your getting involved, and how has it helped you in your government role?

Nikki: Oh boy, my work with SHRM has been a tremendous help to me in this role. KYSHRM is one of the most progressive and disciplined chapters in the Country. I have always had a tremendous respect for SHRM and knew that, in coming into a role like this, and especially looking to significantly transform the HR presence in the public sector, I would have to seek out partnership with organizations that could support, encourage and help serve as an example for us.

To be specific, as I look at our four strategic goals for our enterprise, there are some concepts, like

employer of choice and employee "engagement" that, though somewhat foreign to state government, are well anchored with SHRM and its members. Through our partnerships with SHRM, they have really helped to make these concepts real for our employees. Last year, SHRM helped to sponsor the governor's EEO Conference. The keynote speaker was a close friend of mine and past national chairman of SHRM's Board of Directors, Johnny C. Taylor — talk about a win-win. KYSHRM has also agreed to help sponsor this year's conference as well.

Cathy: As a leader in HR, what advice would you give to newcomers to the profession? How is your advice different for those who have been involved in the profession?

Nikki: I really think that the rigidity and inflexibility of "old HR" is the dinosaur that doesn't yet know it's extinct. The rule espousing, policy dictating, nay saying "impediment" to business has no place in today's workplace. That's not to say that we knowingly permit our clients and customers to act in contradiction to rules or policies, but our job, in my eyes, is to maintain an almost voracious commitment to principle — not necessary policy — particularly where the policy is antiquated and no longer meets the needs of the organization.

I would also encourage newcomers to really think about their reasons for choosing this career beyond simply "liking to help people." Arguably, that's the reason why anyone would choose any profession. Aren't we all in some kind of business that helps people in the end? The HR practitioner should be one who finds solutions through talented people. He or she helps align vision, strategy, and business outcomes to individual and organizational knowledge, skills and abilities.

Cathy: Many of us in HR are striving to be strategic partners. What are the steps that permit HR leaders to be acknowledged by their peers and other leaders as partners?

Nikki: I think it all goes back to strategy, having your own sense of leadership decorum and knowing how to be a true internal consultant, one that can move effortlessly among the many roles that a consultant must embody. I studied the book *Flawless Consulting*, by Peter Block. I've read it, attended several of Peter Block's workshops, and have even taught HR consulting based on his theories. His theory is that consultants need



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to be fluent in the role of expert, collaborator and pair of hands. Different tasks, engagements and assignments call for different consultant roles, and the HR practitioner who hopes to be a strategic partner ought to be familiar with all three.

Moreover, I have long since honed my own leadership style and framework. I am clear about what a leader should be in terms of setting vision, aligning resources, building talent, and being self-aware. These principles have worked for me irrespective of sector, industry, organizational size or structure.

Finally, you have to be clear about what's important to your client leader. In my case, my client

leader (who is also my boss) is the governor. He shared with me, right at the outset, his desire to assure that we foster trust in our work environment, and he wanted to align and encourage our workforce in such a way to assure we have a much more innovative Kentucky. Based on those expectations, the strategy, goals and focal areas outlined above were hatched. It's helpful for my boss to see me as a strategic leader if I can talk about our work, our projects and products under the umbrella of goals and desires that he deems important. It also says to him, and any leader, that his HR lead is listening to him and can respond.

Cathy: Any final thoughts that you'd like to add for our readers?

Nikki: Well, I am overjoyed about the prospects that lie ahead for our state. Our governor is doing his best to lead us through unprecedented times. I am not at all discouraged by our current financial woes, as I am absolutely confident in our state's workforce and our ability to be more nimble, innovative and impactful as we endeavor to serve the citizens of our Commonwealth. Certainly, inasmuch as our Cabinet's motto is to "serve the people who serve the people," we will lead the charge in exemplifying through meaningful and progressive HR programs which will help Kentucky by helping Kentucky's state workforce. ■



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