

Emerging from the Great Pause with Steve Gilliland



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Full transcript

Rob Parsons:

Welcome to the Paychex HR Leadership Series. I'm your host, Rob Parsons. I lead the content team here at Paychex, and we write extensively on a variety of HR topics, covering everything from HCM technology, to team engagement, to compliance with state and federal regulations. Joining me today is Steve Gilliland. Steve is a celebrated motivational speaker and storyteller. In fact, he's a member of the Speaker Hall of Fame. He is also a best-selling author, a successful business leader, and a devoted family man. Steve, thank you for joining us today.

Steve Gilliland:

Ah, you're welcome. Thank you for having me.

Rob Parsons:

We were originally going to talk at the SHRM Conference in San Diego. You were tapped as one of the keynote speakers. You were going to visit the Paychex booth. And needless to say, things have changed since then, haven't they?

Steve Gilliland:

They have. As a matter of fact, the last time I spoke live was March 12th in Cleveland, Ohio at the convention center. And I remember that day when we were evacuated, I was in the middle of a book signing and they just rushed in and said, hey everybody out. But I say that to say that by the end of March, I still thought, you know SHRM is way out there, it's in late June. So very much surprised how quick things changed in the last couple of months.

Rob Parsons:

Yes, we definitely held out hope for SHRM, and I think they hold out hope as well. It's too bad things went down the way they did. So I assume you've still been speaking. How has that changed? I mean, what's a big speaking event look like virtually now?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, it's kind of interesting. Yesterday I did two. I did one for a company that is based out of Minnesota. And then I did one in the afternoon for A. O. Smith, a huge company up in Milwaukee, that's where their world headquarters are. They did something very unique. I spoke for 15 minutes, they took a break, and in that break they had a breakout session. And of course, thanks to Zoom and all the virtual technology, they were able to do a breakout session, have a moderator come back, and they had actually eight breakout sessions. So they had a little discussion, some takeaways, and then I did another 15 minutes, and then they did another breakout, and then I did another 15 minutes.

Steve Gilliland:

For me, it was interesting because part of the thing with virtual is keeping the people who are attending engaged. You know, how do you keep somebody from not checking their email? Because quite frankly, you're simply looking at their face and their little name in the corner. And I thought it was a brilliant way to keep people engaged. It's different. But I go in studio and I use a state of the art studio, and I just present it like I'm live, standing on stage in front of 5,000 people.

Rob Parsons:

Boy, do you ... We are starting to come out of this. Do you see yourself having more business opportunities because of this? Do you see this whole way of doing things changing for the better?

Steve Gilliland:

I like the word opportunity. I think there's more opportunities for very organization. For me, I think there's more opportunities, however, it's defining those opportunities. And most businesses right now, when you look at revenue, it's kind of like somebody says, well that restaurant, man, they were so busy on take out, even though they weren't open. But if you really don't understand what it means to be inside the restaurant, how much business they lost. And it's the same perspective with me.

Steve Gilliland:

When you do a virtual presentation, there are times where an organization will say, how much is your virtual price? And I would love to say to them, and I don't, but I'd love to say to them, the content is the same. The content is not changing. However, as we just said, it's the engagement piece. That the live audience is there, they feel it, they hear it. You know, the emotion, the laughter. So I think for me the biggest thing is there are more opportunities because of virtual and live, you know, getting booked late in the fall and then early next year. But I feel like the opportunities have really changed. The playing field doesn't look the same.

Rob Parsons:

You know, that's a great point. We're starting to see businesses reopen, state by state. Even here in New York it's region by region. And it sounds like you've seen some general themes that you would want people to keep in mind. That there are some positives business people and HR leaders can focus on as we start to reopen.

Steve Gilliland:

I think the big thing, they need to be grateful. And I know when I say that, right now somebody just said, be grateful? I just believe you need to be grateful because I believe this has made us smarter. I think it made us smarter. I think it made us stronger. And I think it made us even more focused. And what I mean by that is when you usually face a detour, gratitude provides that perspective from which you can view life entirely and not be overwhelmed by what's happening temporarily. And reconnecting. Rebooting, if you will. There are many things, but I believe the greatest thing is perspective. What we are going through now, just like any challenge, any difficulty, is either going to make you bitter or better, stronger or weaker. And I just believe the opportunity is to come out of this better, come out of it stronger.

Steve Gilliland:

There are people making decisions today that never had to make those decisions. There are people that are drilling down, going deeper into something because they can't walk five feet over here and say, hey Jim, what do you think? Hey Laura, what do you think? It's like, they're there. They're going to fix it. They're going to solve it. So I think there's a lot more, I don't want to call it thought leaders, but I think there's a whole lot more thinking going on. So I think there's a lot we can be grateful for. And I think if we are willing to emerge grateful and confident and more determined, I think we're going to see this as a very, very positive.

Rob Parsons:

I can definitely relate to that. Paychex, we had to move close to 16,000 people home in a matter of a week. And it worked. And we've actually been seeing tremendous levels of teamwork, and people breaking down barriers and working in new ways because we just had to. It was this concept of forced evolution. You know, as I look on that, I wonder what our leaders can do, as we return to work, what can our leaders do to keep that momentum going? What roles do leaders play to not lose the good, as we move back to business?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, I think for leaders it comes down to, the word I use is confidence. Confidence breeds confidence. And I think that leaders need to remember that. You know, as a parent, as a dad, I have been very confident through this with my family, with the people that work for me. I have been very confident around them. And here's the key, you know, you got to keep positive, you got to be prepared. Because I just believe, you know, some of the traits of confident people, they're positive and they're prepared, but you also have to speak with certainty. Now, I'm not saying make conjectures, and I'm not saying make false promise. But I'm saying speak with assurance. And don't say, it is what it is. Say, it is what you make it. You know, we can't control the situation we're in right now, but we can control ourselves. And as individuals, it's what we make it.

Steve Gilliland:

And then you got to applaud other people. You've got to find something that they're doing good. That's the greatest thing. You always say recognition. Well, you know, when you're in person and you see somebody do something good, you can recognize them, you can give them that accolade. But when you're virtual, you still have to applaud them for what they're doing. You need to just say, you know, Mary, I just want to tell you how much I appreciate what you're doing, working from home. I know you have three children. I know you had to be the teacher to those children. But I also know that you've accomplished a lot. Applaud those people. And the biggest thing I tell leaders, in any situation, especially this, just be modest. You know, just be humble. Because your confidence will speak for itself. And I think that this is a time for leaders to really show their confidence, not just in others, but be confident. Let people see the confidence in you because it really is something that's contagious.

Rob Parsons:

That's really interesting. And you make me think of a dynamic that a lot of HR leaders face, is they need to be managing, managing down to their team, making sure their people are engaged and performing at their best. And they've got to be managing out to the organization and really helping the organization perform at a higher level. But then there's that whole layer of managing up. And projecting that kind of confidence up. Is there, are there particular advice or words of wisdom you can share with leaders that have to make that connection as well?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, what I would tell leaders is, you know, rarely ... we don't get to make the rules in life. Therefore, if you want to exist peacefully, you need to learn to be adaptable. And I think that's sometimes where leaders fail. They're so confident, you know, it's that Type A personality. It's that person that's a good decision maker. But they need to understand, you got to be adaptable. Your ability to manage the multiple priorities and the obligations and adapt to changing conditions are critical. So adaptability for me is something that I find leaders, if they struggle with one thing it's like, yeah but I'm not ... It's because you need to be a little more adaptable. Because you'll add so much more value to your team. You'll add so much more value, upwards, laterally, and downward, if you're just adaptable.

Rob Parsons:

I love both those things you've touched on. We call it agility. Same concept. And we were just responding to constant market shifts. We thought we had to be more agile. Little did we know this real big shift would come. But also this idea of adding value. Have you seen that change? Or how would you encourage leaders to think about adding value now?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, I think they need to go back to, you know, really what adds value. When I was going to be in the Paychex booth in San Diego, and I believe that I will be there in Chicago in 2021, one of the things that I talk about is, how do you add that value? I wrote a book called *The Cherry on Top: What Adds Value*. But value, and adding value, differs from customer to customer. You know, it differs from Paychex customer. And it also differs from person to person. So you have to remember that if your customer or other people, they dictate what's valuable, not you.

Steve Gilliland:

And I think sometimes we have this fixation that, well, I'm going to do this to add value. No, you've got to ask yourself, what will add value to that person? And as a leader, what will add value to John? And Sue? And Laura? And Mike? And Caroline? What adds value to them? Because they dictate what's valuable. As do our customers. So as we're going through this, you've had to ask yourself, what do they see is adding value to them? Because too many times we get in meetings and we say, okay, we need to add value. You know, more value. More value. Well, start by asking yourself, what do they believe adds value?

Rob Parsons:

That's really interesting. And I can see it being applicable as I'm managing a team, and even managing a department. How do I push that idea of personalization out across an organization? How do I build a culture that does, a different definition of the word value, but does value individuals and treats them as individuals, and honors what they are trying to contribute and what they need?

Steve Gilliland:

Man, that is an excellent question. And you know, this is something I have addressed before with leaders. And it comes down to three words. And if you're listening to this podcast I would say, write these down and make them a part of who you are as a leader. The words are, think, act, and share. And here's the question I ask. People have information, but are they allowed to make the decisions? And I think right now there are people that are working virtually, that because they are remote, because they are individualized by themselves, they're having to make some of those decisions. And if people who have the information, were allowed to make decisions, how much better could it be? And the action part, the act part is, I've always said people support what they help create. So you start to support them making more decisions that you used to make. It's kind of like delegation. If you do not let other people do what they can do, you won't have enough time to do what you can do. And through this all, we've learned that shifting those responsibilities is very important.

Steve Gilliland:

And then the share piece, you just gather together with your peers, you just gather together, you discuss the whole think thing, the whole act thing, and say, how can we make this work for us? Because cultures sometimes are not as easy to shift as, you know, a lot of words. People say, we need to change the culture. It's like in sports. A New coach comes in and goes, you know, we're going to change this culture. We need to ... Well, it's not that easy. But all of a sudden, if you begin to empower people, if you begin to delegate more of the responsibility, if you give them more authority to make decisions. So, I think the think and act is really critical. And then share it. Just see what they think. Because they support what they help create.

Rob Parsons:

I like that. And you hinted at the next question that was coming into my mind. You know, not every organization is that nimble. Not every organization even has employees that are willing to buy into that kind of concept. It almost sounds like you're suggesting you need to start somewhere and start building momentum.

Steve Gilliland:

Well, I will say this. You start by remembering where you started. And when I first went into business, and I have said this to my children, I have said this to every employee that has walked through the door, I want to share with you how we started. Because I want them to see the vision of where it was, and how we got where we're at. And when I start to share where we had started, all of a sudden, they realize that I myself, individually, and then the next person, and the third employee, and the fourth employee, we had to change. We had to adapt. We had to be nimble. So first things first. Remember where you started.

Steve Gilliland:

And then you have to have someone help you be accountable. If you don't want to fall back, if you want to really change the culture, and you really want to make that statement of how do we build that kind of culture, you have to have accountability. And I think that sometimes is, we lay out these plans and we have these goals, but there's no accountability. And I think we have to hold each other accountable for that.

Steve Gilliland:

Another thing I do, and I've told leaders this. Change up. Just change your routine. Just stay out of the ruts. Don't get in the same ruts. Because the more you think ... And you know, people say the old adages. Think outside the box, color outside the lines. Well here's my thing. Don't have a box. Don't have lines. You know, just don't get into such a routine that your thinking becomes such that you're in a rut.

Steve Gilliland:

And here's a big one. Give yourself an incentive to work toward. Because if you want to be more nimble, put the carrot out there. Hey, if we do this, we get this, we all get this. And I think that sometimes is, you know ... And again, I hate to use sports references because not everybody loves sports, but I would say everybody that knows the National Football League probably would know Tom Brady. And if you listen to him talk about playing in New England and you look at it, their incentive was always to be the best. So that's why they were flexible. That's why everybody had bought into the process. And that incentive, here's the funny thing about incentives I've always said. They work.

Rob Parsons:

That's absolutely the case. I know that for a fact. And that really is an interesting part of the HR team's role. I loved how you talked about accountability, and then incentivizing the kind of behavior you want to see. I could see technology coming into play and helping out with that as well. I'm certain companies have discovered and been leveraging new technologies as they've been trying to manage these distributed workforces. Or keep engaged with employees and keep them plugged in to what the company's trying to achieve. Have you heard any stories about HR technologies or communication technologies being used in new ways and used more effectively now?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, I think the biggest thing is they're finding out that they can conduct a meeting and they can do it remotely. Then not everybody has to be there. That you don't have to fly people in and you don't have to go to that expense. So if you want to have a meeting where, let's say a world headquarters, and you know, there's a hundred people in that part of the meeting, but then all of a sudden you have your international, or you have a contingency from one of the coasts, depending on where your company is located, they're realizing that it can be just as effective because of the technology. I also think what they're finding out with technology is that, just like when social media was introduced, it's one of those things that people are fearful of that, because it's a big change. You know, it's like, boy, should we do this? Can we use this?

Steve Gilliland:

Speakers. Let's just use that as an example. There are speakers that just absolutely said, I can't do that. I can't do that. I'm a funny guy and I can't be ... Well, how do you think, when a person watched Netflix, how do you think an actor goes in for a movie? I want you to think about a person that is on a set shooting a movie. Think about Robin Williams. When he used to be or star in a movie. And he was hilarious. He didn't have a big audience. You learn to adapt to that. And I think technology is showing us that there's a lot of ways, as speakers, and I've told them, I said, that's using technology to your advantage.

Steve Gilliland:

And again, I've got an event coming up in June where we just had a conference call about that. And here's the beauty of this. I'm not going to leave my studio. I'm going to be here. So if you learn to take advantage of technology that's being offered out there. You know, it's funny too, just got from my personal assistant, the subject line said mandatory Zoom update. And she knows me. And she said, you must update this. Got it. But it was it because even Zoom, think about it, even Zoom is updating and making it even better. Because they know that they need to add more bells, more whistles, and needed to clean up certain things.

Rob Parsons:

Yes. For certain. And that was really interesting, to see certain technologies get overloaded. When that first big wave hit. It was interesting to see these communication tools really get stressed. I'm not sure if you experienced any of that, Steve.

Steve Gilliland:

Well, I did. But I think what is really interesting, and I liked the way you phrased that, is that there are some companies out there that were ahead of the curve. They were already using what we're now talking about. And I think that is the interesting part of this, is that some of us are catching up to where others were. And yet it's like that in anything. And when I alluded to social media, when I alluded to anything, some people just say, no, that's not for me. No, I'm not going to do that. They're not going to do it until they're forced to do it. And what has happened during these challenging times is we've been forced into directions that we didn't believe we needed to be. And now that we're there, we're like saying, wow. Okay. Yeah, this works. This is good. Here's what they need to understand. There are some companies, your competitors, that were already there.

Rob Parsons:

That's a tremendous point. That really speaks to a critical role that HR leaders really need to make sure they find time for. Is that idea of looking ahead. Looking what's next. So that they are the ones who are already there when everybody else is trying to catch up.

Steve Gilliland:

Well, in 2000, two guys flew down to Texas to meet with the CEO of Blockbuster. And I just told this story yesterday afternoon. And when they flew in, they were excited because they believed that there was a chance that they could actually sell the company that they had formed with an idea. Now, there was a lot of idea. It's kind of like watching Shark Tank, and you know, Mr. Wonderful will say, I don't understand how you got that valuation. I'm sure the CEO of Blockbuster said, I don't understand how you got a valuation of \$50 million, but I don't see it. I absolutely don't see it. Don't you wonder what Blockbuster is thinking today?

Steve Gilliland:

Because those two guys who wanted to sell their company for \$50 million now own a company worth \$194 billion. And it's called Netflix. Blockbuster could have bought it for \$50 million, but they didn't see it. And I think that's where we're at today. Use this time, use this challenge, to be open to possibilities that maybe you were never open to. And I just talked to a speaker, I love the guy. I love him to death. But he's not open to things always. And I said, you've got to be open to things. You talked at the beginning about opportunities. I think there are opportunities. But you know, that's the old saying. They always look bigger going than coming.

Rob Parsons:

Yeah, for sure. I love what you're saying. I love the idea of staying open. My biggest worry is that people will slip back into old habits. They'll return to business as usual. It's easy for us to say, stay open. What's some advice you can give people to really enforce that and really make that a priority?

Steve Gilliland:

Well, it's funny. I just told the Blockbuster Netflix story, but you know, all I would need to do is if I'm around a person, and I tell our employees, I've told my family, and I have family that works as employees, I've said, you know, some of you don't remember Zenith and some of you don't remember-

Rob Parsons:

Oh yeah.

Steve Gilliland:

Oh, I'm about to preach to the choir here with [crosstalk 00:22:41]. You're in Rochester, New York. So least I mention Kodak.

Rob Parsons:

Uh-huh (affirmative).

Steve Gilliland:

When you think about companies, you know, Zenith, Kodak, Polaroid, IBM. I could name you 10 companies that were the leader in their market, but they slipped back into old habits. After they were forewarned, if you will. And now when you look at it, you say what happened? Well what happened was, you were given a warning ... And here it is. I'm right now, and you know, it probably won't be ready till late next year, but I'm in the midst of starting to write another book based on what's going on. And it's going to be called Wake-Up Call. I think what happens is you get a wake-up call and you go back to business as usual before you know it. How about a heart attack? You ever have a person have a heart attack, and all of a sudden they change their diet, they begin to run, they begin to walk. And then you see them a year later. And they're off their diet, they're not walking, they're not exercising. It's because there's an invincibility factor.

Steve Gilliland:

I just believe that when people are winning, they seem invincible. And they feel invincible. And that's what happens. You slip back into old habits when all of a sudden revenues will start, things will begin to get a little bit, as they say normal. And then before you know it you've allowed your competition, again as we just touched on, to get ahead of you again. Because what they're doing, they're not going backwards. You know, there's an old saying, never burn your bridges. Here's what I say, burn them. Because if you burn your bridges, you can't walk back over them.

Rob Parsons:

That's a great analogy. And it's, you know, you make me think that times like this, and it's like my dad used to tell me, they don't make character, they reveal it. And you can see, I've even seen just in the types of companies we've worked with. There's those that have really risen to the occasion, and those that have just really not, have not stepped up or have been revealed to have had cracks in the armor or to have been flawed to begin with, and are really trying to play catch up now.

Steve Gilliland:

Absolutely. And I love the, that armor, if you will, I like that analogy as well. Because you just feel like you're invincible. And I'm going to use that word again. And all of a sudden, somebody reveals that. We must have had the same teacher because I had a coach that used to say, you know, sports does not reveal character, it's going to build your character. And then one time I had somebody else say, no sports doesn't build character, it reveals it. And later I kind of thought, you know, that's the same thing but it was said two different ways. And then I really analyzed and thought, wait a minute, sports doesn't build character. It actually reveals it. It'll show us who you really are.

Steve Gilliland:

And by the way, that's something else that I, you know, and just off the cuff here, I hear people all the time say, you know, the glass is half full or half empty. And it goes back to having one coach say, you know, sports doesn't reveal character, it builds it. And then later in life, I hear somebody say just the opposite. Well, think about the glass half full, half empty. The glass is not half full or half empty. The glass is half full or half empty depending on whether you're pouring or drinking. And as leaders, as HR professionals, understand something. That during these challenging times, you have to have perspective. And I think one of the things I'm grateful for is this challenging time has revealed perspective in certain things, because I saw them one way and now I'm seeing them completely a different way.

Rob Parsons:

For certain. And you're taking me back to something you touched on earlier, that idea of humility. And that idea of knowing you're fallible, and knowing there's room for improvement, and needing to aspire. And keeping that burning. The way, like you said, Tom Brady and the Patriots.

Steve Gilliland:

Yeah. And you know what? Lessons learned, wisdom earned. And I think this should be one of the greatest lessons most leaders, most HR professionals, we all should be learning a huge lesson. But remember what I just said. Lessons learned, wisdom earned. You've got to apply the lesson. And you've got to remember and take that wisdom and use it wisely. Use it to make some changes that you probably needed to make before this. And yet you didn't have to. And now you're forced to.

Rob Parsons:

Steve, that was a wonderful finale. I was going to ask if you had any parting thoughts for our audience. That was a great close, but if you've got something else you want to drop on us, please let me know.

Steve Gilliland:

I will share with the audience this. And I was just asked this on, all right here's one, terrestrial radio. I was interviewed on a terrestrial radio station last week. And for the youngsters that are listening, look it up. You know, it's that thing in the car that used to have push buttons and then you'd find your frequencies. But anyways, I was being interviewed. And this person interviewing me, said, you know, 21 years professionally speaking, 10 books, traveling the world. You have talked a lot. You have written a lot. But if you could only give one piece of advice, what would it be? And it was very, very simple. So my parting thought for our audience listening to this, decide what's important and never take it for granted. Because focus is so important, and so many times we say what's important, we know what's important, but we take it for granted.

Steve Gilliland:

I had somebody say to me one time, just look at the number 168, which represents 24 hours in a day times seven days, which represents one week. 168 hours in a week. Write down the five most important things in your life. And ask yourself, in any given week, write down beside those five things how much time you've spent with them in a given week. It'll surprise you. Because what we say and what we do, sometimes they're two different things. We say, this is important, and as we started this interview, one of the great things we were talking about was reconnecting. The whole process of rebooting and what I'm grateful for. I'm grateful that I've had time to reflect on what's important. To slow down and say, listen, you know what? I keep saying this is important. And now I've been forced to make it important, which has been a good thing. So decide what's important and never take it for granted.

Rob Parsons:

Tremendous, Steve, I appreciate it so much. And I recommend all of our listeners to visit stevegilliland.com. And if you get a chance to hear him speak, please do. Steve, that was a very enlightening and very enjoyable interview. I very appreciate you taking the time today.

Steve Gilliland:

As I said, the pleasure was mine. Thank you.

Rob Parsons:

I hope everyone enjoyed that interview as much as I did. To listen to other great interviews with HR leaders, please visit paychex.com/podcast. There we host all the episodes from our HR Leadership Series, as well as our Paychex Business Series, hosted by Gene Marks. Thank you once again for listening.

Speaker 3:

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