

GSB Alumni Spotlight Profile

Chynise Cunningham

Senior Vice President of Human Resources | ABOC | Chicago, IL



From HR Expert to Banking Insider

In July 2023, Chynise Cunningham was Vice President of HR Management at ABOC when she was called into a meeting with both the president and CEO of ABOC. Following an unexpected tragedy, the bank was without a human resources lead, and they were confident she could step into it. Although Chynise had no doubts about her extensive human resources knowledge, she wasn't as confident about her banking knowledge.

She recalls the conversation: "I don't know anything about banking, but I know leadership, HR, and HR law. I promise you I won't break the law. That's all I can promise." She quips, "I guess I behaved; I'm still here, and I was promoted. I'm grateful."

Chynise was promoted from Vice President of HR Management to Senior Vice President of Human Resources, making her the youngest Black female in the bank's senior leadership team. She currently oversees all HR functions, including strategic planning, training and development, benefits, compensation, diversity and inclusion, and labor and employee relations.

Chynise began her career in retail and never planned on a career in human resources. "I'm a chatty person and enjoyed training people," she says. "I had a mentor who told me I should be in human resources. Someone believed in me and thought I'd be good at it." She started by teaching workshops on the topics of HR, labor relations, performance management, laws, and grew from there. That was the beginning of her HR career, but it was during her 17-year career at global retailer H&M that she expanded and honed her HR expertise. The European company valued capability over results. It was this opportunity that prepared her for ABOC.

She acknowledges that despite her affinity for people and her human resources expertise, she continued to feel hindered by the gap in her banking knowledge. She was leading the entire HR function for an organization where she didn't speak the language. "I don't have banking knowledge," she says. "Sometimes, when her colleagues would speak, she would say: 'You speak bank.'" She recalls frantically writing down unfamiliar words and googling acronyms. She knew she needed help. Her bank President recommended the GSB Human Resource Management School.

GSB and Learning to 'Speak Bank'

The 2025 HR school graduate credits the school with more than giving her an understanding of acronyms; it gave her a framework for asking the right questions. When banking materials or terminology came up in training, it

prompted her to go back to her colleagues with specific questions. It sparked conversations about her own development and helped her identify her blind spots and further connect. The classroom experience of professional development mattered to Chynise in ways she didn't expect. Getting away from her office and her open-door policy, which she notes as being both a blessing and a curse, gave her space to focus, and being in a room with other people sharing and tackling similar challenges helped her immensely.

She says her GSB education confirmed that she was on the right track with her strategies. She'd been pushing back on some traditional banking approaches, while implementing ideas from market trends and her previous work experience. The President and CEO both gave her room to try things. The curriculum reinforced that the things she was already doing were aligned with industry trends — such as her focus on employee development and culture shifts. "It gave me validation and reassurance," she says.



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Bridging People Strategy and Bank Performance

When Chynise joined ABOC in 2022, an employee engagement survey had revealed serious morale problems. Additionally, numerous areas of the bank were outdated, and the culture needed a reset. Armed with her change management prowess, she put her focus on modernizing HR strategies and practices and prioritizing building company culture. She implemented performance reviews for the first time in the bank's 100-year history; she changed out the HRIS system; she revamped open enrollment; and she worked with an analyst to create a salary structure so that raises weren't arbitrary. As with all change, some employees have embraced it while others have taken time to get used to it. She's received pushback, but she's also seen results—the

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employee engagement scores improved in the first year.

With the support of leadership, she also restructured her team. When she joined ABOC, the team consisted of her and a benefits and compensation manager. She knew the workload wasn't realistic or sustainable. Now she has an HR coordinator handling payroll and auditing, a talent acquisition specialist who also manages internal communications, and a benefits manager focused exclusively on the complex world of union versus non-union benefits, pensions, 401(k)s, and total rewards.

Chynise has been equally pragmatic in her approach to diversity and inclusion for the bank. Although she says she doesn't have the bandwidth to create formal employee resource groups, she appreciates their value. As a result, she has empowered employees to create these groups, and now there are currently three at ABOC. "I do have a strong belief in them," she says. "If you create the inclusion and the education, the diversity comes."

She partners with the bank; working with community organizations and participates in job fairs and financial literacy events at least twice per quarter. She also uses her budget to educate and celebrate different cultures such as Lunar New Year. She also advocates for local restaurants in Chicago's many neighborhoods instead of national chains, with a goal of supporting the diverse community that ABOC serves.

Growing up, she valued the experience of being a Girl Scout. To give back, she became a lifetime member. While Chynise couldn't commit to leading a troop, she knew she could make a difference working with the older girls. "People



Above: Chynise sharpens her focus with archery practice in her free time.

always think about Girl Scouts as little girls selling cookies," she says. "But Girl Scouts does so much more, and teenagers need the support, especially now." The Girl Scouts has pushed this self-described girly-girl to do archery and ziplining. "I'll try anything," she says. "If I don't like it, I just won't do it again!" She also enjoys cooking, spending time with her husband and friends, and shopping. She jokes that she has her PhD in procedural crime shows. "I've watched every Law & Order episode, SVU, all of it!"

It fits with who Chynise is as an HR leader. She sees potential in people and relishes helping them grow. ●



GSB-Wisconsin Promotes Olivia Luster to Marketing Manager

Madison, Wis. – The Graduate School of Banking at the University of Wisconsin-Madison (GSB), a national leader in executive banking education, is proud to announce the promotion of Olivia Luster to Marketing Manager, effective January 1, 2026.

Since joining GSB in early 2025, Luster has played a key role in supporting the school's marketing and communications efforts. In her new role, Luster serves as GSB's functional marketing operations lead. She is responsible for leading the execution of GSB's overarching brand strategy and promotional campaigns while managing the school's diverse digital presence. She also collaborates closely with executive leadership, contributing tactical insights that help shape GSB's future marketing and outreach efforts.

"Olivia's promotion reflects both the impact she has made and the leadership she brings to GSB," said Paul C. Katz, GSB President and CEO. "She embodies our mission and understands the needs of our partners. Developing leaders starts with investing in our own people, and we are excited for Olivia to continue strengthening the GSB brand and driving our growth."

Demonstrating her commitment to professional growth and the evolving digital landscape, Luster earned a Digital Marketing Science Credential from the Wisconsin School of Business Center for Professional and Executive Development in October 2025. This specialized certification includes advanced endorsements in email marketing from HubSpot Academy as well as Google Analytics. Prior to joining GSB, she developed expertise in marketing communications, driving impactful initiatives in the manufacturing sector.

Founded in 1945, the Graduate School of Banking at UW-Madison is sponsored by state banking associations across the central United States and the University of Wisconsin-Madison. GSB remains at the forefront of industry education, offering its flagship graduate program alongside specialty schools in Human Resources, Technology, and Financial Management, as well as agile, innovative programming designed for the modern banker. ●