

HR as a Strategic Business Partner

Get Up, Get Out, Get On It

How HR can Become a Strategic Business Partner

By Patrick Ibarra, The Mejorando Group

In his book, *Human Resource Champions* (Harvard Business School Press, 1997), human resource management educator and consultant David Ulrich speaks of a new vision for HR, “that it be defined not by what it does, but by what it delivers—results that enrich the organization’s value to customers, investors (taxpayers), and employees.”

What exactly does this mean? It means the role of human resources continues to evolve and that its value should be defined as the contribution it makes to organizational effectiveness, and not simply historical measures that don’t measure effectiveness like the turnover rate.

Traditionally, the role of human resources has been limited to administrative functions such as recruitment, payroll, benefits administration and workers’ compensation. However, with recent trends to outsource many of those processes, the future of HR is at a critical juncture: try to hang on to the past and risk becoming marginalized, or embrace a new and different future that requires different competencies. There is a clear and unambiguous imperative confronting the future of the HR professional: rethink the HR function’s structure, services, and programs to address how it can add value to today’s organizations or suffer the consequences.

I have known several HR professionals over the years who continually lobbied to have a “seat at the table” of their organization’s brain trust and contribute to devising a strategy and executing tactics only to find that when they arrived at the table they were not prepared. Often they spoke HR jargon which adversely impacted their credibility in the minds of their peers and superiors. Furthermore, their business acumen was lacking when discussions focused on the issues their customers (i.e. other departments and their employees) were struggling to overcome. Combine a heavy dose of HR language with a lack of business acumen and you have HR people with little influence, and thus, minimal value. This reinforces the notion that HR services are transactional and not strategic and feeding the trend towards outsourcing.

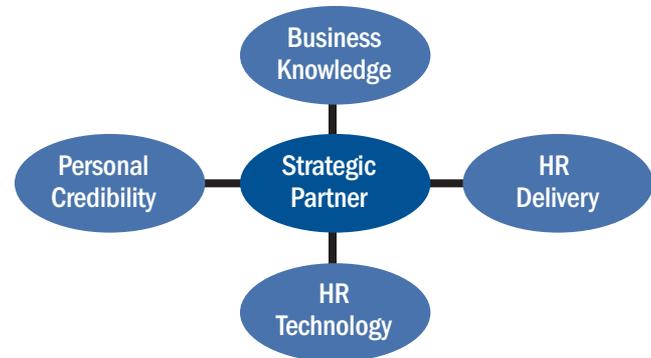
In an effort to take on a more proactive, business-minded approach, HR should function as a business partner. The business partner approach emphasizes that the role of the HR function involves developing systems and practices to ensure that the organization’s workforce has the needed competencies and is motivated to perform effectively. HR must not only have a seat at the table when business and organizational issues are discussed, it must bring a credible perspective about the role it plays in helping the organization anticipate and respond to pressing issues. To legitimize their seat at the table, they must use terminology that is relevant to the organization’s business needs and rely less on HR-speak. Moreover, they should be able to comfortably transition between macro- and micro-related issues—the strategies and tactics involved in helping improve the performance of their organization.

Several recent studies have addressed the new competencies required by the HR function as it strives to be a strategic business partner. In addition to HR professionals acquiring new competencies, the function itself must be revised so as to integrate the new competencies and to provide services in a manner that adds value. One competency that must be addressed is the area of leadership.

Historically, many HR professionals have chosen not to be strong, assertive organizational leaders. Maybe they tried in the past, and were summarily dismissed by their peers or their own manager. Regardless of the reason, the time is now to embrace your role as a leader and not wait for someone to grant you permission to do so. You should tactfully “crash” the party and invite yourself in. The leader and strategic business partner are similar to the chicken-and-egg equation—which comes first? The two actually have a reciprocal relationship and being an effective leader can strengthen your strategic business partner role and vice-versa.

Being a Strategic Partner is an Outcome

Beyond simply referring to oneself as a strategic partner, actually being one is the result of performing a variety of responsibilities: an outcome.



Source: Brockbank, W. and Ulrich, D. (2003) *Competencies for the new HR*, University of Michigan Business School, Society for Human Resource Management, and Global Consulting Alliance.

Business Knowledge

HR professionals must understand their organization in particular and government in general so as to provide strategic contributions. Business acumen about non-HR subjects has to be viewed by operating departments as a credible partner. Granted, it can be a full-time job just to stay up with all the latest issues impacting the field of human resources, what with court cases, changing federal and state laws and so forth. So what can one do to be conversant about issues impacting their departments? Here’s a list of steps you can immediately take:

- Regularly attend staff meetings for operating departments. Prior to attending your first meeting, chat with the senior manager in charge of the meetings and let him or her know you are genuinely interested in learning more and you believe that by attending their meetings you will increase your level of understanding and as a result be more effective. Once people at the meeting realize your presence does not indicate that, “someone is in trouble,” they should begin viewing your role differently. A key here is attending regularly, not simply when it is convenient. Remember you are attending these meetings to listen and learn and not necessarily to contribute until you are more seasoned and able to do so.
- Meet with senior managers of departments and ask a series of questions related to budgets, work processes, management practices and operational matters.
- Find a mentor for yourself from another department.
- Mentor an employee in another department.
- Instead of attending another HR-related conference, buddy up and join a department director and attend one of their conferences.
- Read periodicals your customers (i.e. other departments) are reading to stay current with their issues and potential solutions.
- Participate in a job-shadowing program. For example, work alongside field employees two days a month and progress down the list of employees alphabetically so as not to give a whiff of favoritism.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 4

Get Up

continued from page 3

HR Delivery

Already a strong suit by many seasoned HR professionals, this area focuses on the principles of human resource management: staffing (attracting, promoting and retaining strong performers), designing and implementing programs that facilitate change; and managing employee performance. Recommended steps include:

- Re-visit the structure of the HR Department and institute client service teams that support a number of departments. Each team should be comprised of an analyst and administrative support personnel at a minimum and provide the daily services to department managers they support. In addition, create “centers of expertise” for classification and compensation, training and development, and workplace safety comprised of HR specialists that support the client service teams.
- Explore innovative practices to impact the sometimes constraining forces of a civil service system. Provide hiring managers more discretion by transitioning away from the rule of three and rule of five to the rule of 10 when hiring new employees off a civil service list.
- Provide behaviorally based interviewing training for all employees responsible for hiring.
- Encourage the use of effective selection tools to ensure quality hires.
- Design and implement a systematic and comprehensive approach to succession planning. Succession planning is not about playing favorites or creating an entitlement atmosphere for incumbents, but instead is an open, results-based development process to build talent within an organization.
- Introduce competencies, i.e., a combination of smarts, skills, attitudes and behaviors, to the organization and integrate them into recruitment and promotional processes, as well as the performance evaluation system.
- Develop a robust training and development program for all employees to participate in.
- Revise the existing performance evaluation system and incorporate changes that focus on results more and activities less. Preach that performance management is a process, not an annual event and for those in supervisory and management positions, concentrate a large portion of their evaluation on their ability to manage and lead a team and less on their own individual performance.
- Augment your knowledge about effective organizational development principles and practices and become a change advisor to departments pursuing initiatives to improve operations or introduce new programs.
- Implement meaningful performance measures. While turnover can be a valuable metric, what actions is the organization taking as a result of analyzing that type of information? Turnover should be tracked by department, occupation and manager and then, based on trends, a response should occur. Other meaningful performance measures include: cost per hire, time to fill a job, and workdays lost due to on-the-job injuries.

HR Technology

The “silver bullet” syndrome that technology is the solution to any problem that befalls an organization should be discarded. Resist the habit of relying on IT staff to solve HR-related issues. Instead, determine how best to apply HR technology and Web-based channels to deliver services. Recommendations:

- Implement a Web-based application process for candidates seeking employment. Allowing applicants to print a PDF of the application, manually complete it and then submit it does not constitute a Web-based system. A number of applicant tracking systems are on the market and beyond streamlining the process for applicants; they also provide real-time information to hiring managers about applicants and the status of a recruitment. Visit

www.ci.seattle.wa.us and www.sanjoseca.gov to review some best practices concerning applicants and the Web-based application process. While these are large organizations and the assumption is that large organizations are more sophisticated and have more financial resources to invest in such advancements, the fact remains sophistication and investment have little to do with the size of the organization and more to do with the leadership of those within the organization.

- Install a robust intranet permitting employees to register for benefits, make non-economic changes to personal information, and read updates on policy and procedures changes.

Personal Credibility

Like it or not, the most influential factor for HR to be considered a strategic partner as determined by the hearts and minds of other departments are the characteristics of the HR professionals themselves. That being said, much of this is within the control of the HR professional.

Credibility, in an odd sort of way, is both an input and output. It is an input through which HR professionals are allowed to do more value-added tasks once they have established credibility with the department managers they support. Similarly, it is an output that is earned by mastering the competency factors that comprise the personal credibility domain.

Recommended steps to take are:

- Meet commitments.
- Ask a lot of questions to help shape an issue so it can be solved.
- Act with integrity.
- Build and sustain effective working relationships throughout the organization.
- Solicit feedback from your customers on your performance and everyone working in HR.
- Train and develop HR staff members.
- Balance the advocate vs. regulator role and be more consultative when asked a question by an employee or manager.

Strategic Contribution

For too long, too many HR professionals have not considered themselves as leaders within their own organization, somehow wanting their manager to give them permission to assume the mantle of leadership. I am a firm believer that indeed HR professionals must “get up, get out, and get on it” when it comes to leadership. Only by taking the risk of being visible and having their opinions scrutinized will HR professionals step beyond their comfort zones and truly contribute to their organizations’ effectiveness.

While department directors and their employees often advocate that HR should play a more significant role in order to realize that transition, those same departments must accept a new way of conducting business or progress can be difficult to achieve. Persistence and generation of some early victories, i.e. visible, meaningful outcomes, is crucial in convincing departments that this newfangled strategic partner role they’re hearing about, is indeed here to stay.

Patrick Ibarra, a former city manager and human resource director, owns and operates The Mejorando Group (www.gettingbetterallthetime.com). Spanish for “getting better all the time,” his firm partners with governments by helping them increase employee performance and organizational effectiveness by providing consultation, facilitation and training. Ibarra has spoken at various IPMA-HR events, including the Western Region Annual Conference and state sponsored conferences in Arizona and Texas. Ibarra can be reached by phone at (925) 518-0187 or by e-mail at patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com.—N