

A Simple “Do’s and Don’ts” Guide for Elevating the Human Resources Function

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At every human resources conference, speakers, workshop leaders and attendees pose questions like: “How do we become strategic partners with the line organization?” “How do we gain access to the boardroom?” “How do we get our clients to involve us earlier, when decisions are made?” “How do we stop being the HR police?” All of these questions are legitimate, but I have rarely seen a succinct, how-to answer. Sometimes, in business, we are guilty of overcomplicating versus simplifying a situation. No profession is guiltier of this than the human resources profession. We create 2-by-2 or 3-by-3 HR strategy matrices. Long and elaborate books are written on how to create a truly strategic HR function. Let’s see if we can make it simple. Here’s my simple “Do’s and Don’ts” List for elevating the value and the strategic access and impact of your human resources function. And, unlike typical consultant recommendations, I have actually seen these suggestions in action, and have actually done some of them myself.

Do’s

Do Number 1: Insert yourself. I once worked for an HR executive who, when I complained that we weren’t being included in key decision-making meetings, said: “Stop whining about it and just go to the meetings. Insert yourself.” Her long-standing strategy was very simple; she just showed up whether or not she was invited. In almost every case, while people knew she hadn’t been invited, no one was comfortable challenging her presence in front of the entire group. She used this simple rule in more than just meetings; in any process or initiative that was started in the organization, she simply inserted herself. On the rare occasion that someone did challenge her need to be involved, she asserted her right by saying, “Will you be doing this without any people? If so, you’re right then. I don’t need to be involved.” Once involved, she always added business value (See Do Number 2). Over time, line executives included her in critical decisions, both for the value she did add and because they knew she was going to insert herself anyway.

Do Number 2: Add Business Value. While providing HR strategy consulting to a company, the HR team described their greatest contribution to the business as ensuring that employees’ rights didn’t get trampled on in the process of achieving business goals. While an absolutely laudable contribution and a crucial one for protecting and preserving the health of the business, this alone cannot be the

most significant HR contribution. If it is, your function will be perceived as the function that always wants to make employees happy. While some line executives might buy into the importance of employee morale and happiness, many will see you as overly focused on employees at the expense of the business. Your ideas and suggestions will be viewed through a prism of “Well, he’s always trying to stick up for employees.”

The HR teams that I have seen with the greatest credibility do a great job of making sure that employees’ rights aren’t trampled on, but that’s not what they’re famous for. They’re famous for driving initiatives that solve business problems. They have managed acquisitions and mergers. They have created sales training and sales management processes that have increased business results. They have designed and managed compensation and performance management systems that have increased productivity at a lower overall cost to the company. They have effectively filled numerous positions with talented people at a fast-growing start-up. They have helped the new CEO communicate his vision and get employees energized about it. Most importantly, they can articulate in a few words exactly what they do to further the business strategy. Ask yourself the following question every single day: “How are our HR initiatives adding value to the business?”

Do Number 3: Become a strategic pragmatist. A paradox perhaps? Sure it is, yet this is the most critical business competency and the one in shortest supply. What is a strategic pragmatist? First, a strategic pragmatist is strategic. Everyone gets hung up on how to be strategic, yet being strategic is actually simpler than you may think. Strategists ask the questions that everyone has lost sight of, questions like: What is the business problem we are trying to solve? What are we really trying to accomplish? How will those things help get us there? What is the longer-term impact of this decision? How will it affect customers, shareholders or employees? Most people, including CEOs and other line executives, get tangled up in the tactics like kittens, and the person who untangles them is a hero for the team. Be the executive who sits at the table and keeps the group focused on the real end game.

Second, a strategic pragmatist is pragmatic. An elegant corporate strategy that is too complex or cerebral for employees in the field is not an effective strategy. I once worked with a CEO who was the most strategic thinker I ever saw or met in business. Yet, he was also a terrific pragmatist. He once said that his only regret in his career as a CEO was that he didn’t spend more time in the field where the business really happens. Despite that, he was often the only person in the room during a strategy planning meeting who would raise the real-life, practical obstacles that frontline employees would face in executing a particular strategy.

As human resources professionals, we need to take my most admired strategist's regret to heart. We have to take every opportunity to get out of the corporate ivory tower and spend time where the real business happens. We have to meet with customers, suppliers and employees to hear the real issues. We have to ride with salespeople on sales calls and sit next to the customer service representatives as they field complaints from customers on the phone. We can't design a management development program without first shadowing a real manager to see first-hand the daily demands of the company's frontline leaders. We have to involve line managers and employees in helping us to design our HR programs. At the same time, we have to make sure that we never lose sight of the objectives we are attempting to accomplish or the business strategy we are driving. That is what strategic pragmatism is all about.

Do Number 4: Keep it simple. The best HR executive I ever knew was extremely strategic and analytical. He was also a pragmatist. But most importantly, he believed in keeping things simple – both in terms of design and in communication. Once, when I was designing a talent review and management development planning process, he pointed out that while the design was comprehensive and precise, it was too complicated. It might be the best theoretical approach, but he could see line managers rolling their eyes and complaining about the corporate bureaucracy if we launched it with all of its bells and whistles. He was right. A simpler design accomplished more than the elaborate and more complicated one because managers recognized the areas we wanted to review and felt comfortable talking candidly and openly about each of their direct reports. Sure, it didn't get at all the subtleties of human performance and development. Did it really need to? Look at every process you have, from staffing, to training, to performance management, to compensation, to benefits and ask yourself this question: "Is it as simple as it could be?" Ask yourself: "What does the added complexity really buy us?"

Two Simple Don'ts

You should always have more Do's than Don'ts. Here are my two picks for the most important Don'ts.

Don't Number One: Never tolerate poor performance. Not to generalize, but we are pretty bad about this. We want to set the example for the organization for fairness and for maintaining good employee relations. We got into the human resources business because we passionately believe that people matter and that they make a difference. We believe that people deserve feedback and that they deserve second chances. We are right about all of that. Unfortunately, we use those principles as a rationale for giving poor performers on our own team more

time, more chances and, frankly, more rope to hang themselves with than we would ever recommend that a line manager give in similar circumstances. Yet nothing hurts our credibility more as a department than a low performing employee. Because HR people have contact across the organization and because our work affects how people are treated, how they are paid and how they define their relationship with the company, a poor or even mediocre performer can do a lot of damage. I have seen us tolerate everything from the employee relations specialist who can't objectively analyze an employee-manager conflict, to the compensation analyst who repeatedly makes mistakes that affect the paychecks of hundreds of employees, to the training manager who doesn't show up to teach her sessions, and everything in between.

Here's a paradox – We need to be compassionate and humane as we deal with individuals and rigorous and ruthless about holding them accountable for their performance and for meeting our expectations. You can have no room in your HR organization for C players. You have to have as many A players backed by the commitment and hard work of reliable B players. You need to rid your organization of the C players. The HR teams that I have seen with the most influence and impact consist of only high-performing professionals. They are so talented that they are respected for that fact alone. Other executives look at that HR team and say, "I wish I had the talent on my team that they have." As you're driving home from work today, ask yourself what your line colleagues would say about the talent on your HR team. If they wouldn't wish for your talent, you better get rid of your C players and hire A players to replace them.

Don't #2: Don't drink consultant Kool-Aid. I'm a consultant so I can say this. What does that mean? It means that you can learn, and I have in my career learned, a great deal from external consultants. But I have seen too many of my colleagues become completely seduced by a consultant's theory, and like children following the piper, they unquestioningly follow that theory and preach it and practice it. They become so enamored with it that it becomes a hammer in search of a nail – the theory or idea becomes the solution to all of the organization's woes. When they talk, they really just regurgitate the "consultant speak." They believe in the theory, and the consultant convinces them that if they try to change it, they are compromising it and they are selling out. So, my drunk-on-the-consultant-Kool-Aid colleague doesn't question or adjust the idea for practical application. When it doesn't work, the consultant tells them it's not the theory's fault, it's the organization's fault; it's a backwards organization. Sorry, but that is bull- you can finish this sentence. The only good human resources or organization development theory is one that translates into real business results for the company. If you can't make it work, the theory is not applicable in an unadulterated form in your real world.

Does this mean you shouldn't work with external consultants and that you shouldn't seek out their advice or expertise? No, and not just because I need to pay my mortgage. External consultants can bring new models, theories and best practices to your team's thinking. They can expand your view of what is possible. They have seen a lot. They can be more candid than some internal employees will be about the flaws in your approach. But question the ideas. Take apart the theory. Mold it and change it to fit your real business. Be the strategic pragmatist who sees the value of the consultant's strategy but knows that the tactics must be different because your organization is different. Challenge the consultant to adjust the theory to real life. See them as expanding your thinking rather than molding it.

In the end, you elevate your HR organization in the eyes of the company when you think and act like a business leader. You elevate your organization when you make a difference and have impact. You are a strategic partner when you take your unique perspective on organization issues and bring practical solutions that move the company's strategies forward. You can't do that unless you have top talent. You can't do that without your own ideas, ideas that can be applied in the real business.

So in 2100 words or less, I hope that by inserting myself I have added some business value to your pragmatic and simple HR strategy. Sorry, that was "consultant speak" but, fortunately for you, I'm all out of Kool-Aid.