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For Workplace News

It's been ten years since I attended my first human resources conference where the grand rallying cry was "turning HR into a strategic business partner". Recently, I attended another conference and saw a show of hands which revealed that the same issue was still the primary one on participants' minds. How much progress has HR made in assuming that leadership position, I wondered? The answer, although dismaying, contains a silver lining: the future is brighter than the statistics would indicate.

First, some bad news. In a recent survey of HR professionals, only seven percent identified themselves as strategic partners. Compound that with the fact that seven vice presidents of HR at Ontario hospitals were "let go" in the last year because of cost-cutting efforts. Moreover, as many can attest, HR has also suffered from the realignment and outsourcing of services- one of the few "growth sectors" where HR is concerned. Taken together, we can predict that many of the roles HR plays in today's organizations could be

Bringing No Answers to the Table: The New Strategy for Human Resources

replaced or outsourced in the near future.

And yet, the demand for what HR can provide has only gotten bigger. To answer the call, HR leadership has to establish its ability to connect the people side of the business with the business' operating strategy. Most business leaders, who have a tendency to be isolated in their various silos, view this chasm myopically. Only HR has the inclination, let alone the capability, to energize business strategy across the organization by ensuring that the right people are in the right roles at the right time.

Why hasn't HR assumed that leadership role yet? If we consider the duties that HR has traditionally been covered within the organization, we get a sense of where we have come from and where we need to go.

Human resources grew out of personnel. The primary role that personnel filled in the organization was soliciting interview candidates, attending dismissal meetings, filling out paperwork, hearing grievances, and seeing that the compensation was dispersed as promised. Personnel might have been involved in some training work, but that was mostly left to training professionals, and the

training itself would have been focused on technical skills.

The field of organizational development, to which HR now aspires, is a relatively "young" idea. Many of its original teachers are still active researchers and passionate advocates, some of them fresh and insightful, others sounding a bit like broken records. Even so, as the new kid on the block, OD has not been embraced or supported by many companies until relatively recently.

HR has talked the mission of the OD function, but walked the tradition of personnel. To serve business leaders like a good cost centre should, HR has provided a sense of comfort to the organization that is taking care of its people by supplying a sense of humanity and empathy, while making sure that decision-makers don't do any of the illegal employment practices that might land people in jail. Put in this passive role, HR still waits for its phones to ring, and it is quick to kowtow to the CFO whenever he or she screams for cost reductions.

Don't believe the situation is really so grim? Then think about the power of the language associated with the HR function. Often, when I speak to business leaders about people issues, I talk disparagingly about the way HR handles its role. I'll say something like, "succession planning is not a bunny kissing, tree hugging, touchy feely endeavour, but a critical

business concern.” Heads in the room will nod, and a different level of dialogue will result. It’s as though those business people are thinking to themselves: “Here’s someone who’s not going to make us sing Cumbaya for a change.”

Together, we roll up our sleeves and get to work to define the tough business challenges facing the organization and how we are going to meet those needs.

What I don’t bring to such meetings are pre-set answers. Business leaders do not want pre-packaged viewpoints that don’t address real issues. They want outsiders to have fresh perspectives which challenge their thinking. The answer is not having any answers! I often picture the traditional personnel or HR manager as analogues to the fabled Maytag repairman waiting for the phone to ring. When the executive suite finally calls and says, “We need this now!” HR is only too eager to please. In fact, that is not how a real business leader operates. To assume its position at the strategic executive table, HR must:

- Ask questions and stop having immediate answers.
- Continue to push the dialogue until the next level of answer is discovered.
- Develop processes and programs that demonstrably impact customer service, productivity, quality, safety, and ensure that people in the organization have a clear line of sight to the company’s values and vision.
- Learn how to say no.

- Ask the question why?
What will this do for the organization a year from now that is not happening today?

To get into the game, HR must learn to speak and think like a business person charged with making strategy operational. HR must have the courage to ask: “Have we considered this...? Answering the call of the business doesn’t mean doing what the business wants – it means doing what the business really needs. When that happens, the business will call on HR in a different way.

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