

DEEP DIVE

'Let it break:' How HR can stop putting out fires and think strategically

HR can propel a business into the future, but how do you get the CEO's ear, and what do you say once you have it?

By Jennifer Carsen

Published Sept. 13, 2019

Many HR professionals feel they aren't in a good position to help influence the direction of their companies in a meaningful way.

"Most organizations' view of HR is too narrow," according to Traci Fiatte, CEO, Professional and Commercial Staffing, Randstad US, who spoke to HR Dive via email. While benefits and compliance work are critical to regulatory and legal compliance, she said, "HR can also propel a business into the future."

HR's role is particularly important given the resource it manages. "Talent is the most important differentiator in today's marketplace," said Beth Kelly, president of HR Collaborative, via email. "You can purchase supplies and materials from any place around the world, you can find financing from a variety of banks and private capital groups, and you can buy lists of customers from multiple data sources. The only thing that truly makes your company unique is the people that work there."

Thinking strategically

An effective HR function is closely aligned with overall business goals, and that requires strategy-level thinking, according to Shalini Duggal, chief people and culture officer at Achievers. "To tackle large, systemic workplace challenges like improving company culture, strengthening employee engagement and supporting a multi-generational workforce, HR needs buy-in from leadership and decision-making power," Duggal said via email. "To get that, practitioners need to think like a CEO or CFO."

The only thing that truly makes your company unique is the people that work there.

Beth Kelly

President, HR Collaborative

How does HR get a say in the overall goals and direction of an organization, if it doesn't already have that input?

"It's a little bit of a chicken and egg situation," said Cheryl Roubian, VP, people at Greenhouse Software. She said organizations often fail to include people leaders or HR, who then feel they *can't* be included.

One problem, said Roubian, is that the skill sets of people who have success in an HR role are "often different from, say, a sales leader who is used to elbowing his or her way in." The solution, Roubian said, is to "make yourself relevant. Do you understand the business and have a clear vision and opinion? Have you written

this out and showed it to the leadership team? If so, have you asked for feedback and worked to refine it and make it better?"

It's crucial that HR has "something interesting to say," Kelly added. "That may sound harsh, so let me explain. For most of my years in HR, I've had a voice at the leadership level. That's because my primary focus was on what the business was working to accomplish, and how people can be a force multiplier to make that happen. When a CEO hears talk like that, she tends to want to hear more."

Duggal concurred: "During my career, I've often seen peers select program metrics that don't derive true value and aren't actionable. What HR needs to do is clearly communicate how workplace programs drive business success and impact the bottom line."

Once an HR professional has something interesting to say, he or she will need someone to say it to. "You can have the best HR leader in the world, but if they don't have a partner on the other side, it doesn't matter," said Roubian. And many HR leaders, unfortunately, are dealing with a lack of support. "Without question, you either have a company that embraces and engages human resources, or one that doesn't," said Fiatte.

"Reports and studies consistently indicate that CEOs want more strategic leadership from their top HR executive," Kelly said. "At the same time, I hear HR professionals express frustration that their voice isn't listened to. There's such a big gap between what the company needs from an HR professional and what they get." While this gap is narrowing, said Kelly, this is not happening as quickly as either side would hope.

Carving out time

How do small HR teams (including HR departments of one) make time for big-picture thinking and initiatives? "We all have this instinct to just do *more*," said Roubian. While that's good to some extent, she said, there is a downfall. "You have to be willing to put stuff down and let it break. Something will fail or be on fire for a while so that you can learn how to prevent future fires."

Getting into the weeds of the day-to-day can actually be appealing on some level, noted Kelly. "As HR professionals, we can be drawn to the tactical work for many reasons. It's within our comfort zone of competence, it's typically time sensitive, and it's very satisfying to take care of a company need or employee request.

"Strategic work, on the other hand, can be a stretch out of our comfort zone, typically doesn't have a specific deadline (so it can be put off until the tactical is done ... which it never is) and may ultimately create more discomfort and ambiguity for the company or the employee. Working first on big-picture issues requires a decision to do so, and a commitment to make it happen."

Kelly agreed with the need to, as Roubian put it, let things break: "[T]oo much tactical work left undone may get you in trouble with your co-workers and leader. That's why it's important that you're focusing on the most important work for the company. So when your leader asks why the tactical work isn't getting done, you can say 'because I've been working on creating this important initiative for our business.'"

Set the boss's expectations as to what will be set down and/or on fire, advised Roubian, because "there are always going to be fires — always."

"The bottom line is, big-picture thinking and strategic initiatives are necessary," said Fiate. "Make time for it."

Create a culture of engagement and excellence

While a strong and strategically minded HR department can help create a positive corporate culture, the reverse is also true, our experts said.

"In my experience, companies with strong culture and engagement have a high functioning relationship between the CHRO and the rest of the company's leadership," said Kelly. "Conversely, companies with weak or toxic cultures and poor engagement don't have strong HR departments."

If you want your people to be engaged, focused, and making good decisions, "you must think strategically and get the right people in the right roles, and have them learning and developing new skills," said Roubian. "This doesn't happen by accident, and if you are always reacting, these are the first things to go (or the last to develop)."

HR also plays a vital role in diversity and inclusion. "[F]or any organization where diversity and inclusion is important to work culture, there is no better group in the organization to help your company to achieve this," said Fiate. "If diversity and inclusion practices are something your company needs to improve upon, it

would be difficult to do that without a strong partnership with the HR team."

Driving positive results

"It's so fundamentally important that HR should think strategically," said Roubian. "Having a strong, healthy business — you get to that by having engaged employees who are well suited to their roles and engaged and who stick around. You don't get to those things without a strong, healthy organization and being intentional."

"It's about hiring, onboarding, and managing your people, as opposed to being reactionary and waiting until something is on fire. Intentionality is tied to good business outcomes."

The bottom line is that HR may need to catch corporate's eye *first*, as a precursor to gaining more influence. "Once leadership sees ... [the] ROI of HR programs, HR gets a bigger voice in an organization's overall direction and more resources to achieve their own goals," said Duggal.