

business partner – making it work

I do not subscribe to the HR neurosis over role – and feel confident and proud about the work we do in business.

Business Partner is a not a job title I have ever held or used in my teams, but I think I know what it means. So what makes a good one? Is there a key to success?

Here's my manifesto:

1. Stick to the strategic

HR performs a strategic function in business, if people don't get that they shouldn't employ a HR function. So do the strategic job. Focus on the longer term health issues of the business. This will mean that at times you will need to let a few here and now issues go and take some grief for this – suck it up!

Hird and Hesketh (CPHR 2008) talk about the golden triangle i.e. the unholy alliance (my words) between HR, Finance and CEO. I prefer a strategic partnership with the Strategy Director – we're both in the same game. Building long-term organisational capability in response to business strategy.

The view that says, doing the HR admin well is your ticket to operate at the strategic table is a contradiction and probably a rumour spread by those in our profession who are not comfortable with the strategic role.

2. Know your business

Some say that HR is a transportable skill and to an extent I agree, but there is also something to be said for developing an in-depth knowledge of the sector in which you operate. The characteristics are different and context is everything in HR. The here and now of retail, the fast-changing world of technology, the highly regulated world of Pharma (or now banking), the long-term planning of the defence sector. HR will do different things in these different contexts. Is it all about talent attraction strategies, geared reward, leadership of change? The context does matter. All too often we see vanilla solutions proposed, what are the specific requirements of your sector and how do you build your knowledge and insight into this over time.

3. Bringing forward the voice of the people

Ulrich and Brockbank (Michigan) talk of amplifying weak signals. It is a sad reality that businesses are not awash with emotional intelligence, in HR we typically have some. Can we thoughtfully capture the employee voice and bring it to the table, to improve productivity, retention, climate, wellbeing, customer satisfaction etc. This is catnip to senior leaders, as it's so hard to really understand what's going on out there in the wider company. There are plenty of rich sources of info these days from pulse surveys, to Glass Door to LinkedIn.

4. Challenge and intervene

Lots of HR people build their reputation on helpfulness and support, it's better than being unhelpful, but it's not the point. You have to speak up and challenge, based on insight. Bridge/CIPD talk of being a provocateur. This takes a degree of bravery and sensitivity, I've seen people get it wrong and simply disrupt. It's subtle, you have to pick your issues and your moments carefully. Build coalitions of the enlightened and develop the issues that will move the business from where it is to where it needs to be.

5. Manage and execute well

All the good ideas and clever interventions will come to nought unless they are turned into plans and projects and implemented well. I know we're all ENTP's but it's no excuse – train yourself, get some help but somehow have the capability to deliver on time, within budget and to spec – it's what businesses do!



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**John Whelan, Human Resources
Director, BAE Systems**