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For Workplace News

HR is at the leadership table, but still not a strategic partner

During a recent talent management summit, I was asked a debate-provoking question: What makes strategic talent management strategic? Among the audience of experienced and talented HR professionals, a look of interest flashed on nearly every face.

I had a simple answer: A strategic talent management plan will ensure that that people in the organization are capable of executing the strategic business plan.

Everyone seemed comfortable, if not self-satisfied with that answer, so I threw in a caveat. Does that mean HR has a partnership with the leadership team, but still isn't a strategic part of the business?" An uncomfortable, if embarrassed silence followed.

If you are in HR leadership and consider yourself to be a strategic partner, let's take a test:

Answer this: What makes strategic talent management strategic?

- If you are executing recruitment, performance management, training and development, and even succession planning do you truly know the full intricacies of the organization's strategic business plan?
- If so, have you fully considered the implications of the business plan to your human capital plan three to five years out?
- How many current jobs will not be necessary three to five years from now?
- How many jobs will be necessary at your company, which don't exist today?
- As the business plan successfully unfolds, which jobs will evaporate? Have you informed those people their roles will be obsolete? Are you ensuring their employability within the organization?
- Are you training people on what they need to do today despite the fact that those skills and capabilities will be obsolete in three to five years?
- Are you recruiting and promoting based on today's definition of the job, or on the job description of tomorrow?

Not everyone in the room looked comfortable with the questions I posed or the answers that came to mind. Some were argumentative, torn between the demands being made on them to fulfill the

needs of today, and the lofty expectations inherent in my three-to-five-year outlook. But what does strategic really mean?

Consider the hiring process. We still post jobs based on job descriptions, much as we have done for the previous half-century. We tag levels of experience and education to the job description, as though the recipe to bake a valued contributor to the business plan is sacrosanct.

Isn't it time we challenge that concept? How necessary is a college degree or years of experience in the high tech industry, for instance, when you want to hire entrepreneurs or innovators? If a young Bill Gates, Michael Dell, Steven Jobs, or Mark Zuckerberg submitted an application, would you know whether or not to hire them simply by examining their resume? None of those billionaire innovators even graduated from college. If the business plan calls for growth through innovation, is your job description appropriate for the challenge, or is it limited by conventional thinking?

Now, let's consider the strategy of succession planning. It's a dirty secret among philosophically minded educators that education's primary purpose is not to revolutionize society but to

maintain the status quo. Does your company's business plan assume the status quo will be in place five years from now? If not, I suggest you rethink those training activities in which your high-potential employees engage that merely replicate the needs of today. Instead, you'll need to create learning experiences that develop and nurture promotable people in ways that will advance the company's strategic vision.

Even some HR leaders who understand the language of strategic business plan execution sometimes fail in the handling of detail. In particular, I am thinking of those organizations that streamline their HR function by outsourcing recruitment, performance management, and training and development to an HR consulting firm. To me, this approach doesn't fit with being a strategic contributor. After all, if having the right talent in place at the right time is absolutely critical to your organization's future success, why would you release that function to an outside firm handling your competitor's needs as well? I can't imagine this happening in another part of the business. It would be like ceding design of your brand strategy or product line to the same firm handling your competitor's offerings.

Today, succession planning, performance management, and leadership development are looked upon by the more in-vogue term strategic talent management. But when I ask HR leaders what will make the talent management strategic, I get answers that are vague and insecure. This leads me to believe that the new language is just a shuffling of the deck chairs on the ocean liner

called HR.

HR leaders are indeed caught in a bind between the needs of business and the nuances of people. It's much easier to determine the ROI of a product launch than the effect of leadership development in order to satisfy the hard-numbers orientation of a CEO raised in finance or engineering. HR leaders twist themselves into pretzels trying to come up with validating statistics to support their contributions to the business.

It's time to focus on a different starting point. Based on the progress of the past decade in raising the profile of the HR function, you already have a better relationship with your organization's top leadership. Take advantage of that relationship to develop a clear-cut understanding of the organization's strategic business plan. Then reverse engineer that plan to determine the people needs going forward. If you are able to align activities like recruitment, performance management, and succession planning to make your talent management plan meet strategic needs, you won't need to project ROI you'll be too busy being part of the strategy.

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