

How to Be a Successful HR Business Partner

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Now that the economy is showing tangible signs of improvement—or at least is giving off the impression that we can see the bottom from here—those of you in HR are in what may one day be viewed as the most pivotal moment of your career. Somewhere down the road, 20 or 30 years from now, you might just look back and realize that the decisions you made in the spring of 2009 changed not only your career path but the course of your entire life. Like the proverbial ripple in the pond, the actions we all take in the coming weeks and months will help make or break our careers, our companies, our families' security, and our economy.

Why do I feel so strongly about this? Because I've seen it play out before. During the last big economic downturn, the dotcom bomb—which now seems like a few bottle rockets compared to the current thermonuclear meltdown—many companies were wiped off the map, but plenty of others bucked the odds, either by staying a course that proved to be true or by cleverly reinventing themselves to capitalize on the new realities. Those that did saw huge market-share gains and thrived during the boom years that followed. And this success led to an abundance of career opportunities, allowing C-level officers and HR execs alike to take on more responsibility, gain more exposure, develop new expertise, and feel the wonderful sense of accomplishment that comes from taking risks and making a difference.

Looking back on this time, I realize that, for me, it was a defining moment. During a period in which 90% of our competitors would ultimately disappear, we refocused our business around what, at the time, seemed like a risky bet: that human capital would be an important differentiator in the coming years, and that there would be a huge shortage of strategic HR professionals. We gave up a lot of potential business in order to position ourselves on the executive-search side as the HR-only experts, and frankly, my business partner, James Holland, and I also gave up a lot personally in order to always be available to clients spread across the globe. But it paid off in every possible way, not just financially but also in terms of personal satisfaction and career development. And not just for James and me, but also for our staff; to them, hitching onto this train meant a wide-open opportunity for career and personal growth. It was up to them to decide what kind of roles they would play and how they would develop. For those in mid-career, it gave them a chance for reinvention. The younger ones, meanwhile, were able to jump-start their careers with meaningful responsibilities and experience. Those that gave 100% of themselves every day and showed that they could add strategic value thrived in this environment, and needless to say I am damn proud of them.

Now, fast-forward to today, a far scarier moment in our history than the rubble of the dotcom era, but one that may prove to be even more rife with opportunity. According to a report from the Gartner Group—which matches up almost perfectly with what I've been hearing in conversations with dozens of our clients—there are seven specific issues and concerns at the top of the list for most CEOs as we look to claw our way out of this recession: Companies are rapidly restructuring both organizationally and financially, focusing on efforts that are core to short-term survival and future growth while divesting themselves of the rest; they're worried

about the public's lack of trust, global political instability, and the advent of new regulations; and they're eyeing opportunities to cash in on the government's stimulus efforts and the greening of corporate America. Which means the trick for all you HR people out there is to figure out how you can really help your CEOs, CFOs, and business-unit leaders with these areas of concern.

In the past two weeks our HR search practice has picked up substantially due to acute demand for strategic HR support. Overall headcount is not growing for most of our clients; in fact, as the result of increased M&A activity and further off-shoring, many will continue to downsize. But companies are definitely investing in HR again. One client told me yesterday that her company has weathered the storm much better than expected, and she's afraid that they now won't be able to hire enough HR Business Partners fast enough. Others are saying that there's a dearth of strategic HR executives who fit into their corporate cultures. A SVPHR at one of the Valley's largest employers recently told me that, after leaving a number of senior HR positions open, they're now moving ahead to fill them. What's more, after all of the downsizing the company has experienced, these new HR leaders will have a green field.

What can you do to ride this wave? If you're already employed, you should be sharpening your Business Partner skills—no matter what your current title—and pushing yourself beyond your comfort zone in order to keep up with your internal clients. Use a fresh set of eyes, don't be wedded to any relationships, and be brutally honest about how the business needs to restructure. For example, you could proactively suggest ways of speeding up off-shoring activities or moving employees around to meet shifts in demand; you could find new ways to keep senior executives engaged and happy while they transition into working remotely as more teams go overseas; you could assess employee engagement and productivity levels following RIFs and devise new performance-management criteria to account for reduced staffing levels; you could even propose due-diligence methodology to improve the performance of future acquisitions.

Meanwhile, for those of you out of work, you need to get re-engaged or your skills will soon become out of date. Do whatever you need to do to get your foot in the door. If worst comes to worst, volunteer to do strategic HR pro bono for startups or not-for-profits—anything to get you back working and performing. If your resume is so-so, admit it and reinvent yourself. PDQ, with emphasis on the D & the Q.

This year at HR conferences, I'm doing Part II of my talk on the emerging role of the HR Business Partner, going into the specific skills that HR professionals need to deal with the current business climate, sharing easy-to-use models, and practicing case studies with groups.

We all look at indicators: stock prices down and unemployment up. But, the real game is how to help companies survive and even thrive during this time.

What are CEOs focusing on? How can you as their BP help them? Let's start off and look at what CEOs are worried about, and then we'll look at the four most utilized "tools" BPs can use to support them.

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This emerging Role of the HR Business Partner is different from three months ago, different from a year ago. Why? Because entire business road map has changed. And with that, comes new responsibilities for CEOs, and therefore for all of you.

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In the form of layoffs, financial restructuring through deleveraging of financial structure, corporate restructuring via entity consolidation, and finally industry restructuring through the failure and survival of different players and business models. How can the company control its cost while not killing its ability to grow.

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The urgent issue of the CEO is to pare down the corporate efforts to those that are central to the company's short-term survival while not killing off its future.

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The institutions that we once counted on to safeguard the economy have failed. This brings up an issue of trust: trust is an intangible element in business but is crucial to *transacting* business.

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Off-shoring, moving facilities around, problems with that. Especially, increased security risks like La Grippa porcina.

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With the current recession and the crisis of business confidence, CEOs should expect new governmental oversights of their business dealings. And all this governmental oversight leads to feeding the beast.

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Socialism? I'm not sure. I'm just happy—*whatever* it's called. The recession has shifted the growth dynamics of the global economy from private industry to government. And *that's* going to have ramifications for all of us.

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While Gartner does not expect green to necessarily be "top of mind" in 2009, it will still have a place at the table as long as CEOs believe it is a useful part of reducing the break-even point of the business.

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These seven CEO concerns all translate into four identifiable actions you'll be seeing your CEOs take.

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See cheat sheets.

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There is a disconnect between strategy and operations. Do some strategic planning using the STEEP model. Figure out what the business outcomes should be and work from there.

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Go in. Meet with the major players. Find out what's going on and what role in the problem each person is playing.

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Communicate. Communicate. Communicate. We can't stress that enough. Create a survivor program. Pull the hi-po's and make sure they understand their career development and pathing you've created for them within the business plan of the company moving forward.

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We went and called all the salespeople around the world to found out why they were quitting. The problem was their old managers told them that nothing would change when, in fact, everything changed. They were given too many product lines to sell and had to spend too much time in product training and were not able to make their numbers, which had been increased.

Know the business you're a part of. Internally, what is its history, culture, success drivers, and what makes it unique. Externally, what is the marketplace including relationships with customers and competitors.