

# Human Resources as a Strategic Partner: A Practical Guide

By Rita B. Allen

As we all read the papers, trade journals and periodicals, we see that surveys consistently show that executives name “people issues” among their top concerns – the things that keep them up at night. In fact, past studies of CEOs by the Conference Board have identified the availability of top talent, employee commitment/engagement, and stimulating innovation as high on their list of challenges. In addition, “HR Magazine” recently published an article that stated there has been a substantial increase in the strategic nature of the Human Resources role over the last few years in order to add value and improve effectiveness specifically in the areas of talent management, performance management, analytics and metrics, and innovation. Particularly in these challenging economic times, the Human Resources function plays a key role in ensuring the organization’s competitive edge by creating initiatives that are directly aligned with achieving business goals and deliverables.

We are also consistently seeing a growing demand for business degrees in the field of Human Resources and strong business acumen in the top three required competencies of an effective human resources professional. How can the Human Resources function achieve this level of effectiveness in an organization?

*Human Resources as a Strategic Business Partner: A Practical Guide:*

1. **Organizational Culture** – Education begins at top with the CEO and his management team. Build strong relationships and win their support and credibility.
2. **Do Not Wait for an Invitation** – Constant selling, influencing, negotiating and leadership required by Human Resources throughout all levels. Flexibility and adaptability are key – keep an open mind and make adjustments accordingly depending on people and situation! Deliver solutions – be a problem solver.
3. **Know the Business** – Be business savvy. Understand your organization’s vision, objectives and strategies. Create Human Resources vision and initiatives that are directly aligned with achieving business goals and deliverables.
4. **Understand the Bottom Line** – Be financially savvy. Achieve deliverables that match business needs while managing costs and being accountable for financial results. Evaluate outsourcing vs. in-house considerations – rise above the tactical to focus on strategy.
5. **Competitive Advantage** – Assess capabilities and competencies needed to maintain a competitive edge and build “best practices” to ensure proper alignment.
6. **Confidence** – Trust and believe in yourself. If you truly believe you should be at that table, so will others. Be able to stand up – push back and make important stands as necessary.
7. **Practice What You Preach** – Set the example for strong leadership. Hire top tier Human Resources talent on your team who will be the future leaders. Develop and nurture your staff with the appropriate tools necessary to be true business partners. Consider cross-functional skill-sets – enticing the line to be in Human Resources roles and Human Resources to perform line roles, both of which reap many benefits.
8. **Be Results Driven** – Have well defined goals, make them measurable and publicize the results – create effective marketing and communications campaigns. Focus on results and accomplishments once again, that are aligned with business needs.
9. **Play the Role of Advisor/Coach/Confidant** – Aside from being business savvy, you are still expected to be the “trusted advisor” to the CEO and his/her executive team (as well as your





peers). Ability to deliver difficult feedback goes with the territory as well as building trust at all levels. Create, develop and nurture long lasting relationships internally and externally.

**10. Human Capital Greatest Asset** – Be the advocate of this principle. Be the content expert in all functional areas of Human Resources – be the catalyst that defines, educates and executes a company culture that recognizes its employees as the critical driver of company value.

Use the following checklist to determine how best you can align your Human Resources function with business strategy, organizational goals & objectives:

- Know the Business – Define business goals and objectives, marketplace challenges, competitive position, competitors’ strengths & weaknesses,

market share, financial results (ROI, P&L).

- Have a historical perspective about the industry, its growth, and its trends and a deep understanding of your customer value proposition; know your target customers.
- Identify issues related to emerging customer and market needs; spot potential competitors and threats to your market position.
- Talent Assessment – Identify necessary skills to achieve business goals, competency models, gap analysis, and develop pro-active talent acquisition strategies.
- Promote and manage change and continuous improvement; establish creative and innovative solutions to address short and long term organizational needs.
- Talent Management – Build bench strength, determine learning and development initiatives required to meet organizational goals, provide effective

leadership development, coaching, mentoring and succession planning.

- Business Involvement – Participate as staff member in operational, sales and technical sessions; know the latest developments as they occur.
- Bring cross-functional and cross-business knowledge to bear on issues; learn the business from all perspectives and be sought after as a content expert.
- Be the “on-going recruiter” or “talent agent” internally and externally; Know the industry and its’ key players, stay current on trends and practices and be well read.
- Network continuously – Internally and externally; know the key players, influencers and up-and-comers, become the “go-to” person – gain visibility inside and outside of the organization.
- Proactive Problem Solver – Anticipate, identify and solve potential problems and challenges; understand the role you and your area play in the success of the business.
- Build and nurture strong, long-lasting relationships with all key constituencies and stake holders, establish a powerful network of trusted colleagues, advisors and supporters.

The field of Human Resources has evolved a great deal over the past three decades from being a provider of various tactical and operational services to being a business partner and change agent. In fact, over the last few years it has been identified as a “career of the future” for several reasons pointing to the on-going market demands such as competition, specialization, economic shifts, demographics, globalization, and leadership capabilities. What a great time to be in the Human Resources profession and be able to provide a value add that is unique and greatly needed! ■

Rita Allen is the president of Rita B. Allen Associates, a provider of career management/talent management consulting and coaching services located in Waltham ([www.ritaballenassociates.com](http://www.ritaballenassociates.com)) and the president of ACPI – NE (Association of Career Professionals International – New England), a strategic partner of NEHRA, [www.acpi-ne.org](http://www.acpi-ne.org)