



HAVING A CONVERSATION WITH YOUR CEO

One of the greatest challenges for today's human resource professional is to be conversant with the CEO. This challenge is complicated by the fact the human resources function has been traditionally viewed as an administrative one. What I hope to present is the type of dialogue you can have to position yourself as a strategic partner within an organization.

Preparing Yourself For The Discussion

The first place to begin is with a clarity on your part as to exactly who it is you want to be in the organization and what value you wish to add. Many a human resource managers' *self-image* is in alignment with traditional notions about their career. This self-image is not just about how we *think* about ourselves, but how we *feel* about ourselves as well. Many of us have adapted emotionally to the viewpoint that human resources is not to be considered a strategic partner. As a result there is the tendency to find oneself in a "victim role" dealing with executives who "don't fully appreciate your true value." While we may "know differently" the bigger issue is do we "feel differently"? How would it feel differently to be a truly respected strategic partner? What are the fears associated with taking on such a responsibility? Strategic partners are expected to speak out on questions of concern. Are you prepared to do so with full conviction? How do you feel you would react if your suggestions were rejected? Would you feel victimized or prepared to address the concerns presented? To what extent are you prepared to be 100% responsible for your success or failure as a strategic partner?

Once you begin to understand your own dynamic, the question then becomes "What do I feel like I would really like to be doing? And I mean *exactly*. If the answer is "train elephants" then go for it! If the answer relates to your profession my suggestion is that you plot out for yourself a workweek (not to exceed 50 hours!) in which you would act in your *highest and best use*. It is up to you to define what that exactly is. Perhaps it is one day a week spent facilitating the building of a learning organization. Perhaps it is one day working on strategic planning, two days a week working on system monitoring, perhaps it is one day a week working on employee recognition and reward, and no days a week doing administrative tasks.

Once you have completed designing the ideal workweek, it is time to give yourself a new title. My concern with using the words "human resources" in the title remains its perception as an administrative function. Rather than fight that reality, you

may consider reframing it altogether. For example, I gave the Chief Relationships Officer Forum that title for a reason. One being that it has a “C” in front of the name and the second being it focuses on the highest and best use of building relationships. Define what is important to you and place a “C” or “VP” in front of it.

Now that you’ve clarified your career path and given yourself a new title, it is time to analyze the company’s needs.

What You Need To Know About Your Company

I have met human resource managers who have never read the company’s annual report. Even if you are the most seasoned human resource professional there is plenty more you can learn about your company’s operations. A good place to start is with the company’s financials. Then find out what is the direct contribution to the bottom line of your department? How can it be benchmarked and communicated? How does your department impact on others? For example, if HR does a poor job of checking references, and marketing hires a VP of sales who ends up costing the company millions that is a financial impact that could be attributed to HR’s bottom line. Conversely, if HR can benchmark and then identify a reduction in turnover, absenteeism, hiring, and other costs, it will be better prepared to have a business conversation at the highest level. Does your department have a strategic plan that is in coordination with the company’s overall strategic plan? To what extent are relationships with other departments critical for its implementation?

Fast Company, a well-known business publication, used to profess that the mantra for today’s business economy is “faster, better, cheaper”. However, they have recently changed their tune. The fact is, those things are no longer a competitive advantage for most companies. Most of us have already obtained the technological boost. Fast Company now states that the mantra is “*change, learning and leadership.*” To what extent can you become conversant and help add value to the company in these three areas? What can your department do to help facilitate change? What can your department do to help facilitate the creation of a learning organization and how can your company help grow the leadership skills of management? In order to properly address these three subject areas you must be very clear as to the company’s intended direction, what needs to be learned in order to succeed and what leadership means in that context.

You should also have a decent understanding of the competition. Who are your competitors? Where are they located? What are their strengths and weaknesses? What programs do they use with their employees, and with what success? What information digging do you do when you go to human resource conferences and other networking affairs? Are you probing for critical information that could affect your company’s bottom line?

You are going to have to give yourself a self-taught MBA (if you don’t already have one) because that is the expectation of almost every strategic partner in Corporate

America today. Enroll in part-time MBA classes and watch your value to the organization grow dramatically.

Now that you are clear about your self and have a good grasp on where the company is going and what its needs are, it's time to have a deep conversation.

Creating A Dialogue

Dialogue is so powerful because it creates a safe place for communicating. The first thing to be aware of is your physical state. Are you tense? Are you nervous? Are you walking straight and holding your head high? Are you engaging in eye-to-eye contact? Have you dressed the part? Are you willing to act the part?

Are you mentally prepared? Have you done your homework? Have you gotten a good night's rest? Are you prepared for the conversation that you are about to have? Have you run possible scenarios through your mind? Do you have a clear outcome in mind?

Once you have addressed your physical and mental state, the next thing to consider is the environment in which you will have the conversation. Perhaps the best place to do it is not in the CEO's office, conference room, etc. Perhaps the balance of emotional energy in those locations is simply too high to have an open dialogue. You could approach the CEO with a suggestion such as "I would like to talk to you about my role with this company. Would you be free for lunch anytime this week?" The basic idea is to try to arrange for a location in which you feel "safe". A place where the environmental energy is balanced.

Now that you are mentally and physically prepared and meeting in the proper location, it is important that you check whatever emotional baggage that may remain that can filter or cloud an open dialogue. Perhaps your filter is that "no matter what you have to say, they won't listen." Perhaps your filter is that you may say "the wrong thing and be ridiculed." Perhaps your filter is that "I am dealing with all men and they do not respect women in business." Perhaps your filter is "I am too young or too old to be fully respected." No matter what your filter may be, it will cause havoc with creating a connection. Realize that the executives have their filters as well. Don't be surprised by them. Be prepared to address them. One of their filters may be "human resources is strictly an administrative function" or "you don't know anything about business." I am sure that you can think of other potential filters. Think them through. Know what to expect and how you will respond to them.

Keep your emotional energy on your side of the 50-yard line and make sure they keep theirs on their side. Chances are you will be getting feedback that is either unfamiliar or unwelcomed. It is important to control your emotions under those circumstances. Understand that the true message behind any statement is usually two or three levels deep. Rather than reacting negatively say to yourself "wow that's interesting,

I wonder where that came from?” If the CEO you are conversing with jumps into what you consider to be your safe space, let them know. It is ok to express your feelings. You do not need to be weak in doing so. For example, if you’re interrupted in the middle of trying to make a point, don’t say, “don’t interrupt me.” Instead, allow the executive to finish making his or her point and then be silent. Unless they are in a black hole, the silence will signal to the executive that interruptions get in the way of dialogue. If for some reason the silence doesn’t do the trick, simply ask that you be allowed to complete a thought before they respond. If the person you are dealing with still doesn’t “get it”, it may be that you need to deal with someone else or even work someplace else.

Get right to the point. Let them know that you would like to make a *dramatic shift* in your strategic value to the company. Try to understand how they think and feel about your role. Probe. Ask what they feel about the department currently. Ask what their experience has been with other human resource professionals. Ask them what they view the growth potential for human resources as being. If they shoot for a high mark then you are in. However, if they still shoot for the middle of the pack, challenge their belief systems in a positive way. Use phrases such as “what if” or “I have studied some of our competitors and” or “I believe we can have an even greater impact on the bottom line than you have imagined.” Then concisely share facts and figures to support your position. Find out what their commitments would be if you were able to meet certain value-added propositions.

Remember to hold onto an abundance philosophy and don’t back down. The CEO will be testing your meddle. How tough are you? Are you prepared to accept the pressures, risks and rewards that come with being a strategic partner? If you are – let them know you are.

Wrapping Up The Conversation

Well, you’ve done it. You’ve now spent an hour with the CEO outlining your vision for a more dynamic and valuable career path. A career that will bring great benefit to you, your department and your company. Follow-up the meeting with a memo outlining a concrete proposal on your part. Ask for a commitment to the time, resources and energy necessary to carry out your mission. Once the CEO signs off, be your own best publicity agent. Let key managers and your department know what your specific goals are, then keep them informed as to your progress. Let them know where they can help you and that you would be willing to reciprocate in kind. Make sure you reward and recognize yourself and others as incremental goals are met.

If in the end you find yourself fighting against a management philosophy that simply doesn’t “get it” then it is time to move on. It makes no sense for you to beat your head in when there is a 3% unemployment rate. Do not be in fear of losing your job. Do not be in fear of not finding a new one. There are plenty of good CEO’s out there who do “get it”.

Conclusion

Becoming a strategic partner is the greatest challenge for today's human resource professional. It is a challenge that begins within. Once you know who you are and what you want to do, you can prepare for a dialogue with your CEO.

Wishing you the best,

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