

Part 1 HR strategist or tactition

What does it take to have a hot seat at the boardroom table?

By Dr M Amr Sadik

Organisational leaders are always addressing strategic issues such as how to be more competitive, how to reduce costs, maintain and improve quality, eliminate wastage, expand the business as well as increase customers' satisfaction ... All these can be achieved by and through people, thus, people practices have become more pivotal to business success and more attention is given to HR to help in such a mission critical role.

HR practitioners are today facing a different set of challenges and addressing a new set of tasks that demand that they be more educated, knowledgeable and adaptive to organisational needs. They are required to move and shift to strategic roles and reduce the administrative aspect of their function. Such a shift requires new skills and competencies.

But, if I'm not mistaken it seems to be that nowadays there is a general phenomenon or

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infectious virus among all levels of HR practitioners, junior and senior, to become strategic, regardless of what it takes to become "the one". No problem.

It's a legitimate goal and the road to C-suite and executive table, but quite possibly many are not yet prepared for such role or they are not playing it correctly. Nonetheless, we can't neglect the fact that there is definite evidence that HR practitioners are playing at a strategic level at the executive table, and are being taken more seriously than before and they have become an integral part of the business and strategic planning process. Unfortunately, these are very few, here and there, as HR is still not viewed as a strategic contributor in many organisations.

Mounting the abyss

1. It was a noontime in August 2001 when my phone rang. It was a former colleague calling me long distance to say that he had been recently promoted to the position of HR Director and his General Manager had asked him to prepare a strategic HR plan. In actual fact, he was looking for answers to the question: what the hell is a Strategic HR Plan? Having worked previously with him and knowing his background, I felt he was not ready to prepare a Strategic HR Plan, nor differentiate between an annual plan and a strategic one, but as a friend and former colleague, assistance was guaranteed.
2. When I was leaving my then employer in November 2008, I was entrusted with interviewing my successor. I knew his name but had never met or chatted with him before. His name had frequently come in a positive manner in conversation with HR practitioners in the country. Finally we met and initiated our informal conversation, discussing issues here and there. Things slowly moved to HR matters and issues and challenges we were facing, and all of a sudden he said, "I'm currently working at a strategic level." In a blink of an eye I asked, "What do you mean by 'working at strategic level?'" and waited for

an answer. For more than half an hour, I waited to hear something worthwhile. Unfortunately, he wasn't able to provide concrete and clear evidence of his current role, practices or what exactly he was doing in strategic HR, but he added that he was very competent as a strategist. So, I concluded my interview notes by saying, "Mr XYZ is cracking his fingers and providing lip service." That was the same conclusion from the other two interviews he had with the superiors.

3. Mr. MK, who used to be my colleague and my HR Manager in two different organisations, had a lengthy call with me just to say that he is now working at a strategic HR level.

What is wrong with them? And what is the moral of those stories? Is being strategic or playing at a strategic level a new title HR practitioners are looking for or a statement to be used in between official conversation to impress others, or are they just empty words?

There's no problem if they are used by aspirant HR practitioners, but exercise caution. Using the word "strategy" or "strategic" in a wrong context or without knowing what they are exactly and what they entail can get you into serious trouble and may lead to your losing your job or not getting hired.

Rules of engagement

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met, formally or informally, are somehow confused about the two distinctive roles of being strategic, or being a strategic partner.

"Strategic" or "strategy" are probably the sexiest words in the vocabulary of many business people as well as government personnel who adore using the words in every speech, statement and meeting. Why? Because they simply mean something is going to happen in the future, and no one knows what the future will look like and whether this thing will come true or not.

As practitioners, we wear different hats in our daily work assignments.

- The transactional hat encompass our daily routine and administrative tasks and order taking;
- The tactical hat is a solution-focused approach such as finding new medical cover for employees, or getting a good price for an outsourced company-wide training programme or answering a question on how to reduce staff turnover. These have a short or medium term impact; and
- The strategic hat involves a long-term approach linked to one or more business goal that requires multiple solutions or tactics to be implemented.

Thus, we need to master both transactional and tactical duties before jumping to the strategic work. We need to be robust in our tactical approach to HR because tactics are a step down from being strategic.

Remember, the ship has only one captain, not two, in charge of directing it to the agreed destination. Similarly, organisations have one GM or CEO who is in charge of directing them to prosperity and who is in charge of its strategy formulation and the strategic plan. It will never be HR's role to be the strategist unless we are dreaming in Technicolor. The majority of captains, however, have no clue what HR is doing or how they can contribute.

Being a strategic partner may differ from one organisation to the next, depending on company mission but, as general rule of thumb it is a process whereby HR works closely with business leaders and/or line managers to achieve shared organisational objectives.

Sorry, dude, whether you like it or not, you will not be the strategist for your organisation. You are one of the players only when your boss asks you to play. Otherwise you have to stick to being tactical. ■

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