

How to work effectively with the CEO

HR directors are in a unique position to provide credible, strategic advice to the chief executive and have a direct influence over the effectiveness of decision-making and direction-setting.

As the organisation's 'people experts', HR directors bring a perspective and expertise that are critical to ensure executive teams do justice to the direction that is set for the rest of the business. As a result, those HRDs that place themselves alongside their CEO as strategic advisors will have the opportunity to make an impact as valued business leaders in their own right. But this position can easily be squandered if HR operational activity is not up to scratch or the focus is solely on tackling tactical challenges.

Within leadership teams, it is the CEO's role to set overall business direction and identify strategic opportunities and challenges. Most, if not all, do this by drawing on the support and specialist skills of their executive team.

This means that HR directors are in a position to respond proactively to these opportunities and challenges by exploring the people implications and providing the CEO with tangible 'people solutions' that have clearly-articulated business outcomes.

For example, if an organisation is looking to expand into new sectors and/or geographies, HR could suggest the following action points:

- Develop more effective insights into the workforce using pertinent internal and external data
- Ensure that everyone clearly understands the organisation's strategic intent to expand and the rationale for doing so
- Ensure that everyone is engaged with and committed to these strategic plans
- Devise tactical growth plans and ensure that you understand what is required in resourcing terms
- Set long-term targets and objectives to ensure that performance can be measured and the right people are accountable for delivering results
- Develop key individuals to help them move into leadership roles and drive future growth areas of the business.

Making a strategic contribution

Although some of these activities will need to be undertaken by HR, it is not necessarily HR's job to do all of them. But that is no excuse for not setting clear business objectives for each proposed solution.

Failure to either link 'people solutions' to specific business outcomes or attach a discernible value to them simply leaves it open for critics to question HR's ability to make a strategic contribution. But a good HR director will ensure that the right capabilities and infrastructure are in place to make all of the necessary activities happen.

For instance, 'ensuring that everyone clearly understands the organisation's strategic intent to expand and the rationale for doing so' will require managers to set direction, think analytically and take decisions.

If the right personnel are not in place to do so, it is up to the HR director to make clear recommendations to the CEO about how to address the shortfall, follow through on any proposed action and track results in the form of demonstrable business benefits.

The idea here is that HR directors are both best positioned to assess and responsible for ensuring that the relevant talent is in place to support the organisation's business strategy - which includes whether the executive team is made up of the right people to address current challenges.

All too often individuals are appointed to leadership teams based on their reputation and track record rather than a careful assessment of how well their skills and experience fit the current business context.

But HR directors are well placed to advise on selecting new candidates to integrate into the group on the basis of whether they will be a good fit with existing members, culturally and in terms of personality and values.

Positive influence

It is also HR's role to ensure that senior managers find ways of working effectively together, making pertinent decisions and managing corporate performance appropriately through governance activities that are focused and forward-looking.

To do so requires an understanding how to best exploit each individual's strengths and capabilities. But research suggests that, if executive teams do go down this route, a huge 85% spend less than one hour per month discussing strategy (although they spend significantly more time in governance forums).

However, it is not entirely a revelation to discover that leaders tend to become more effective if they focus less of their time on debating past performance and more on taking decisions that influence future goals.

But it is also worth bearing in mind that, if such decisions are fully discussed and agreed upon in a relevant governance forum, they should also reduce the amount of re-work, confusion and internal trade-off debates required.

The idea is that, if an HR director is being effective, they should have a positive influence on the more difficult side of leadership, thus bringing welcome relief to the CEO whose aim it is to try and increase the focus on the business' strategic priorities.

In some instances, HR professionals may even be able to adopt a more facilitative role by setting up suitable processes for the CEO and the rest of the management team rather than being directly involved in the operational running of the business.

But whatever the approach, in order to become a strategic advisor, it is vital that HR directors proactively promote and position themselves as having a central role in the executive team. This is because, only when they influence core decisions and overall business direction, will they be able to bring their full expertise to bear.

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