

Grow Your HR Career by Helping to Grow Your Organization

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“Argh...it’s frustrating,” said Jennifer, taking another bite of her kale and apple salad. “He drops these articles in my inbox as part of our new mentoring agreement. I’m not sure how to think about it.”

“What is it this time?” Nicole, Jennifer’s friend in marketing communications, replied. “I think it’s cool you have a mentor. Not only do you get to assist your VP in running the talent management program for the company, you’ve been chosen for the ‘Rising Stars’ program.”

“I know,” said Jennifer. “It’s just frustrating to get articles about the future of HR and how senior leaders don’t always value what we do in an organization. I love HR. I love having a degree in HR. I worked hard for my credentials. I just don’t get it.”

“Why don’t you ask him?” Nicole retorted, as she dashed off to her appointment with the company webmaster. “He’s got his reasons. Ask him.”

In my teaching and consulting practice, HR professionals often recount stories like this. Someone, somewhere, makes a disparaging remark about human resources as a “dead end”, “non-value add” or “being the department that just gets in the way.”

Here’s the news. This is no longer truth. This is a wonderful time to be an HR professional. It’s time to grow into a true business partner. It’s time to be seen as someone who “gets it.” In the same way that the finance and technology functions have moved from the “number crunchers” and the “geek squad” to strategic business partners, it is time for HR professionals to step into strategic human capital management roles with a full understanding of what that means to their organization. In a recent Harvard Business Review article, Ram Charon and others (Ram Charon, 2015, p. 63) write that “it’s time for HR to make the same leap that the finance function has made in recent decades and become a true partner to the CEO.”

Growing your career in human resources now means growing your career in understanding the business of your organization. Dave Ulrich (Dave Ulrich, 2012, p. 7) states, “HR professionals almost invariably define *business* as ‘HR Business’ and are inclined to talk about their current initiatives in leadership training, recruiting, engagement, or rewards – the areas where they focus their attention on the job.” Continuing, Ulrich states, “The real business is external: the content and the setting in which the business operates, the expectations of key stakeholders, (customers, investors, communities, partners, employees and so forth) and the strategies that give a company a unique competitive advantage.”

Who are your organization’s customers? What is your organization’s competitive advantage? How do your organization’s key stakeholders view your organization? How does what you do in your HR role connect to the external stakeholder’s needs? Growing your career in human resources means knowing the answers to these questions. It means knowing how to look at what you do well in relation to what the organization does well. It means paying attention to the *business*, not just your HR business.

Be Curious

“Bill,” said Jennifer over coffee at the shop around the corner. “I am so excited that you are my mentor in this program, but I want to understand why you sent me that article on the future of HR and how senior leaders don’t value the function. I have to say, it stung a little. I think of myself as a professional and I am thrilled I chose HR as my career. I guess if we are going to make this mentoring thing work, I need to understand why that article on the future of HR is one of the first things you sent me to read and discuss with you.”

“Jennifer,” replied Bill, “I’m a sales guy. I wasn’t all that excited about being asked to mentor someone in the first place, but I’m a team player. The CEO asked, so I said yes. My problem is that your friends in HR always seem to get in the way of my recruiting and hiring a good team. So, yes, I’m little biased. When they asked me to be your mentor in the program, I wasn’t sure, but here you are, ready to take on a crusty old sales guy. I’ve been around this business a long time, Jennifer. I’ll give you what I’ve got. I can teach you a lot about our customers if you’re willing to listen.”

Gosh, thought Jennifer, I might learn something today. “Perfect,” she said. “Tell me about our top five customers. What makes them the top five? How long have they been our customers? What do they like best about us?”

“Thanks, Bill” she said, as she saw him lean forward in his chair to begin the lesson.

Step one in growing your career is rekindling the curiosity you had as a three-year-old. Curious people, as described by Ian Leslie (Leslie, *Curious*, 2014, pp. 17-18) in his book, *Curious*, are “people that take risks, try things out, allow themselves to become productively distracted.” Become “productively distracted” from your day-to-day work. Take the time to meet with the individuals in your organization connected to the customer. Listen to what’s happening strategically in your organization. Read non-HR publications. Study the external factors that impact your organization. Be curious about those things that have nothing to do with your certification courses.

In the CIPD HR Profession Map (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2009), they cite being curious as one of the behaviours needed in developing as an HR Professional. Their take: being curious is a direct link to the ability to provide insights and influence in an organization.

Get Good... Get Really, Really Good

“Jennifer”, said Mark, “it’s seems like this whole mentoring thing with Bill takes a pretty good chunk of time every week. What I don’t get, is why you would want to spend that kind of time. It’s not going to help you do your job better. He’s a sales guy. You’re a trainer. He can’t help you write curriculum. What gives?”

Jennifer replied, “Mark, I’m learning so much about our sales process and our customers. Bill’s a great guy. He’s been teaching me about how we look at contracts, how to protect margin and make the deal, and why our top five customers think we’re the best!”

“Yes,” Mark retorted. “That’s all fine, but you’re taking work home to meet our deadlines for our roll out of the new program next week. I’m just saying, I don’t understand why you’d give up work time during the day to have coffee with the VP of Sales.”

“Don’t you see”, said Jennifer, “knowing about our customers will give me great context in the room next week. After all, we are rolling out this leadership program to the customer services management team. Knowing about our customers will help us link the material to what’s important to them. I don’t mind a few hours of homework this week for us to have great credibility in the room next week!”

Growing as an HR professional is about growing your credibility in the organization. It goes without saying that individuals you work with will expect you to know your stuff and do your job well. That’s one layer of credibility. The second, and more important layer, is knowing what’s important to the business overall.

Dave Ulrich calls this becoming a “credible activist.” He states:

Credibility comes when HR professionals focus their time and attention on the issues that matter to the business, do what they promise, meet their obligations and commitments, communicate effectively and build relationships of trust with line managers and other colleagues, and demonstrate a willingness to take personal and professional risks to create value for the business. (Dave Ulrich, 2012, p. 87)

Becoming a credible activist as part of your ongoing development program means taking risks. It means being very good at your job. It means being seen as a “go to” partner in your area of expertise. That’s the baseline but there’s more. It means volunteering to serve on teams solving business problems outside the HR department. It means asking to ride along to customer work sites. It means that there will be times you will be the one in the room listening, but with an open mind for learning. It means spending time in a business unit, getting to know what they do beyond job evaluation work or responding to an investigation.

Get good at what you do. Get good at what the business does well. Get good at providing insights from being in the field, studying the organization from the customer’s perspective. Get good at reading publications and websites that stay up to date with what’s happening in the marketplace. Know the external influences (ex. commodity prices, weather, public policy changes) that strategically influence the organization.

Walk to the Edge and Jump

“Jennifer, I have an opportunity for you,” said Bill. “I’ve been talking with your manager and she agrees. Hear me out.”

“Ok,” said Jennifer. “I’ve had such a great time meeting with you, Bill, and learning about the sales part of our organization. Tell me about this opportunity!”

“Here goes,” said Bill. “You’re a great trainer. I know, because I heard directly from the customer service manager what a great job you did last week. They were very impressed with what you knew about our customers and how you could link it to the training. I also know that you’ve been working with your VP on implementing the talent management program for the company.”

“What I’d like to do is offer you an opportunity to work directly with the sales team for six months,” Bill continued. “We would put you through a process similar to our sales trainees, complete with the basic sales training and field work we provide new sales team members. You would share visits to key accounts with a senior sales lead. You’d be introduced as a sales trainee to the customers and be expected to listen and learn as if you were preparing to take over an account at some point.”

“You’re smart, Jennifer, and you’ve also helped me see the value of HR.” Bill said. “Your manager, the HR SVP, and I all think there’s a great opportunity here to help the whole organization. The sales organization needs someone in HR who really *gets* what we do. We need help with recruiting, hiring and onboarding. I’ve not been happy with our turnover in sales in the past few years. Your manager, the HR SVP and I all think it’s worth a shot.”

“Bill, that’s awesome!” said Jennifer. “In my heart, I’m still an HR professional, but this would give me great exposure to our customers and the sales team! Let me talk with my manager about the details, but I think it’s a great opportunity for all of us!”

Professional development is about seizing opportunities. Professional development is about working with your manager and your manager’s manager to build skills, experience and to take a leap into something that you may have never considered on your career journey. As Ulrich describes, it’s about positioning yourself to understand the business of HR as well as the business of your organization. This positioning “focuses on creating the future you recognize, anticipates and takes advantage of emerging trends. Positioning requires flexibility and adaptation to discover and then respond to opportunities.” (Dave Ulrich, 2012, p. 67)

Six months later....

“Hey Jen, congrats on your promotion,” said Mark. “A manager title, a special project and big time visibility with senior management, that’s great.”

“Thanks, Mark,” Jennifer replied. “I’m really looking forward to making the links between our HR recruiting and training departments and the sales team even stronger. I learned so much in the past six months about how we can partner together and add real value to the company. Bill said that with some of my ideas, the sales leadership team is already seeing a difference in their group. They are more prepared for customer meetings and generating revenue for the company in half the time. It’s a great partnership and I learned a lot too!”

Growing in your career involves taking risk. The pathway to HR specialist is clear. Certifications, course work and practice all build your skills at the business of HR. The pathway to HR leadership in organizations now requires knowing the organization’s business. Spend time in the field. Spend

time with stakeholders. Study external influences in the market place. Look for solutions that add value. Grow your career by helping to grow your organization.

About the Author



Sandi Cardillo is president of Conrad Associates based in Omaha, Nebraska. Sandi consults with both profit and not-for-profit organizations applying accountable management principles in structuring, talent management and improved managerial practices. She has over twenty years of experience in management, human resources, organization development and internal consulting. Sandi earned both Bachelor's and Master's degrees from the University of Nebraska. She is a Senior Fellow of the Global RO Society and Certified Coach Practitioner. Sandi serves as a facilitator in the Queen's University IRC's Advanced Human Resources program.

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