

HR's role as change transformation agent

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The field of human resources (HR) is evolving. Unfortunately, HR leaders continue to face challenges when fulfilling the strategic role thought leaders and business executives envision for them.

The rigor and capability of HR functions have steadily grown with the development of human capital processes, enhanced business partnering and maturing systems capabilities. The HR department of 20 years ago is long gone, and a more sophisticated, data-driven function has taken its place.

Despite these steps forward, the HR function still has a tremendous task in front of it in terms of becoming true agents of change transformation. Executives should be considering one question: "How well is my HR function helping facilitate alignment between the organization's strategy and the performance of the organization's human capital?"

To take the HR function to the next level of impact and performance, HR leaders need to embrace three powerful roles that can help them become agents of sustainable change transformation.

Seeing the forest for the trees

The role of HR is to help others see both the forest and the trees. Business leaders cannot always discern what is important in their organization. Without full visibility of

the subtle but powerful connections and relationships, a business can struggle to align the organization in a way that delivers value to the marketplace. HR professionals can help the leaders identify and overcome the barriers to change.

Recently, we at AlignOrg Solutions were working with an HR leader and new executive to facilitate a significant organization change that would benefit the business. The executive's experience and instinct suggested a plausible way to make changes. The HR leader asked questions that helped the business leader see the importance of engaging other members of his team so the right level of buy-in could be achieved for the hoped change transformation.

By bringing forward observations, data and insights, HR helps leaders understand the organization's ability to perform. By asking tough, probing questions, HR helps leaders reflect on their assumptions and address unspoken albeit important issues.

Having the tough conversations

Many organizational issues are politically and emotionally charged. Leaders appreciate the great benefit of someone facilitating the high-stakes conversations and addressing the toughest issues in a way that leads to good decisions

and preserves trust. This requires the connecting of key choices to both strategy and organizational values.

As an example, the leaders of an organization (an AlignOrg Solutions' client) were struggling with a severe business downturn and how to handle a staffing imbalance. Culturally, the organization had never laid off employees, so part of the executive team was adamantly opposed to the possibilities. Others on the team could not see any other way to address the business realities without laying off staff. HR played a key role in helping the team discuss the business strategy and the company's values through deep and thoughtful dialogue. The executive team eventually reoriented its thinking about the staffing issue and the best way to move forward. They could not have done this without the change transformation role that the HR leaders played in this situation.

Changing behavior

The practice of change management has been boiled down over time to a few templates that skilled change agents can fill-out and manage like a project plan. Unfortunately, spreadsheets cannot change behavior – particularly tough-to-change behaviors.

When HR plays the role of change transformation agent, they help the organization and its members make real, behavior changes that affect organizational performance. Change management tools are useful, but

the real change happens when HR professionals, who understand the business and its people, help leaders put in place the mechanisms that will drive aligned behavior. These encourage value-based communications, share important business insights, put in place processes that support and enable the right performance and ensure members of the organization are aligned and committed (both publically and privately).

I can recall how one HR practitioner I was working with successfully applied the principles of visual management from Lean manufacturing techniques to help the organization see how behaviors were shifting during a significant organizational change. By making progress visible, the change was accelerated and organization members were able to self-correct misaligned behaviors and performance.

Powerful allies

HR managers can be powerful allies across an organization. When leaders engage HR managers as partners, the result is often a transformative change. But first, HR managers need to claim their role as a transformation agent. As a transformative change partner, HR managers can facilitate deep, lasting change transformation that ultimately feeds the bottom line.

I encourage you to visit the AlignOrg Solutions' website (www.alignorg.com) for other examples of HR managers serving as real change transformation agents.

About the author

Principal of AlignOrg Solutions, Reed Deshler specializes in developing strategic organization designs and helping companies bring them to fruition. As an organization consultant, Reed works with executive teams and HR teams to define winning strategies, align their organization and business models for success and mobilize employees and stakeholders in the desired direction. He has guided Fortune 500 companies – including 3M, Abbott, Hertz, Chevron, Cisco, and General Mills – as well as middle market businesses and nonprofits through change successfully and has helped them solve complex organizational challenges. Reed is a coauthor of *Mastering the Cube: Overcoming Stumbling Blocks and Building an Organization that Works*, a guidebook that Clayton M. Christensen, Professor at the Harvard Business School calls, “a great step-by-step manual on defining and changing the design of your company”. This guide outlines AlignOrg Solutions' organization alignment process, which pinpoints the most common stumbling blocks to a company's success and methods for turning challenges into building blocks that align strategy with the reality of day-to-day operations. He regularly writes and speaks on issues related to organization transformation and ways to implement and create buy-in among stakeholders for new business designs. Reed Deshler can be contacted at: reed.deshler@alignorg.com