EARNING A SEAT at the Table

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EARNING A SEAT at the Table

Moving from Administrative HR to Strategic HR

I believe that HR has a significant opportunity to be a strategic partner to business now more than ever before. Fierce competition, tight budgets, shrinking talent pools and disengaged employees are just some of the significant challenges that business are facing today – and there is no sign that these problems will let up any time soon. At some point, the C-suite will have to bring HR in at a strategic level. When they do, you need to be there.

Unfortunately, today, only a small percentage of CEOs look to their HR departments for assistance with critical talent-related strategies because HR has historically been seen as an area of administrative focus.

Do you need to know payroll? Yes. Employment law? Absolutely.

But getting HR integrated into the business at a high level requires that HR correlate the performance of the workforce with business results. To do this effectively, HR must having a deep understanding of the organization, as well as the internal and external dynamics that impact the business at a fundamental level. Further, you need to connect easily with people and drive results with a sense of urgency and in a manner that allows you to engage and inspire others around you so that you can influence your organization on all levels. In this EBook, we share the competencies that you will need to get a seat at the table. While complex, they are critical and will develop over time as you gain experience.

Section: 1
Build a Strong Foundation of Core Competencies

Chapter 1: **Good communication is paramount for success.**

It's impossible to be effective in HR without good communication skills. Why?

HR is a conduit to many parts of the organization. Good communication fosters an atmosphere in which timely and high-quality information flows smoothly up and down and across the business. A savvy HR executive will understand the goals of each department (or employee) and then tailor the information to match their needs. He or she will also prepared to listen non-defensively, refraining from judgment and using open-ended questions to understand other's perspectives before jumping in.

Since HR fundamentally impacts people's lives in the organization, ideas and responses should be presented logically and with good data that effectively supports a position. It's a great idea to link messages to other related initiatives in order to present a holistic picture about the company's goals and how any given issue aligns with them.

Finally, it's important to use a variety of communications channels to keep relevant parties informed in a timely manner. I challenge HR to constantly think outside of the box when it comes to these channels. Would an online message forum be well received? How about an internal blog? While printouts are important, they don't answer specific questions directly, in real-time.

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Chapter 2: **If you want to be successful, you must be credible.**

Great HR executives are always professional and readily demonstrate sound business ethics. You will find that they are consistent, with solid principles, values and behaviors that build trust and credibility. If you are in an HR role, you should never be sucked into water cooler conversations, employee gossip or griping. You must have integrity and maintain composure at all times.

It's up to HR to address questionable situations or behaviors and know when it's appropriate to share information with relevant parties. HR must also find the appropriate actions to bring a situation in line with the values, policies and procedures of the company. There is no room for hypocrisy here. HR must demonstrate the values they encourage others to emulate.

HR can build trust by following through with commitments, walking their talk, being tolerant of diverse points of view and, always, treating people with dignity and respect and encouraging others to do the same.

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Chapter 3: **HR is in the client service business, too.**

The ability to be proactive while effectively responding to problems leads to strong relationships with clients.

HR should always understand the needs and expectations of clients, so that they can integrate knowledge of the business with HR solutions in ways that enhance the business results and colleagues' experiences. To that end, great HR professionals know and can articulate the financial and operational impact of HR decisions on the business as a whole.

Human capital is one of any company's greatest assets. In many cases, talent is the reason why clients sign on. Since HR is in the business of talent management, they should be prepared to organize and manage talent in a way that provides creative business solutions. To do this, HR needs to be informed of business and organizational priorities, as well as trends and issues that may impact client needs. For example, if a client requires talent on-site at several locations, can HR find a solution to meet this need?

At the same time that HR is proactively considering talent solutions for clients, they should also be monitoring and evaluate client's concerns, issues and satisfaction. The more HR knows, the less they will be caught off guard by an employee relations issue. The ability to be proactive while effectively responding to problems leads to strong relationships with clients, which is an important tool for ascension up the ranks.

Chapter 4: **Collaboration and partnership leads to internal success.**

The more HR initiates and leverages opportunities to work with others across the organization, the more impact they will have on the organization's goals. An added benefit is individual professional development (yes, HR can develop themselves, too) and the ability to "be seen" in a different light by higher ups. If you want to have a bigger role in your organization, identify a goal and then establish critical partnerships to make it happen.

This does not mean that HR should abandon the team to seek individual acclaim. Every employee should place a higher priority on group goals than on individual goals because it takes teamwork to move an organization forward. Good partners anticipate the impact that one's actions and decisions have on others and they jointly agree on a course of action to achieve mutual goals and define responsibilities.

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Chapter 5: **Results trump everything else.**

Find ways to measure and report results so that people know you are effective.

If you want to move up in any business capacity, you have to accept personal responsibility and accountability for actions and decisions and find ways to measure and report results so that people know you are effective.

Be sure to identify goals and plan resources accordingly to ensure they are met. You should always monitor progress, and efficacy of work processes, so that you can trouble shoot problems when they arise. As previously mentioned, find partners to collaborate with in order to achieve the best solution for the customer and demonstrate a willingness to take action beyond usual responsibilities.

The best professionals, HR included, learn openly from successes and failures to improve skills and performance. I encourage anyone looking to move forward in the workplace to try new things, stay curious and remain determined in the face of challenging circumstances and obstacles.

Section: 2

Acquire Intermediate Skills to Prove Your Mettle

Chapter 1: **Good conflict management will set you apart.**

Most people don't like conflict. Unfortunately, you cannot be in HR and avoid conflict. What you can do, however, is learn how to manage conflict effectively in challenging and/ or antagonistic situations by using appropriate methods and techniques to reduce tension and reach a resolution. Since so many people are bad at diffusing conflict, you will stand out among your peers if this is an area where you excel.

Good conflict managers will collect information about the issue from relevant sources before jumping into the fray. It's your job to know what's going on and to understand all the sides of the story before any kind of sit down occurs. Once you are ready, open the discussion by establishing a clear and compelling reason for resolving the conflict. This can range from a simple reminder of team goals, to possible consequences if the conflict is not resolved.

As the conversation moves forward, stays focused on resolution and avoid (or break up) personal attacks. You are working towards a win-win solution, so there's very little room for insults or right versus wrong war games. If you keep it positive and professional, then others are more likely to do the same.

When everyone's cards are on the table, consider solutions and share them with all parties. Encourage collaboration on action items and responsibilities moving forward so that there is individual buy in. Finally, be sure to end discussions with clear a clear summary on the solution and next steps and establish a future check-in point to assess progress.

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Chapter 2: **Hone your influence.**

In order to hire people, manage conflict, propose talent solutions (and so much more!) you will need to gain acceptance of ideas. As you progress in your career, your ideas will grow bigger, require more resources and have a greater impact on the organization. To get buy in, it's important to communicate clearly, with good rationale.

Every discussion I start begins with an assessment of goals, both present and in the future. This way everyone is on the same page. Further, I can learn what other people consider to be most important and then align my ideas with their needs (when appropriate).

When proposing a new plan, back it up with relevant information. This is especially important when you are working with fact-driven colleagues, such as Finance or Operations. Use appropriate methods to gain genuine agreement, such as outlining the benefits to the group (and the company). Different people require different tactics, so be prepared to think on your feet.

Never consider your idea finite. Good ideas are a work in progress. Actively seek out and explore suggestions and recommendations of others. The more involved people are, the more likely that your idea will see the light of day. I also find that this helps establish positive interpersonal relationships because those involved will feel valued, appreciated and included.

Finally, always summarize the outcome of the discussion and establish next steps so that you don't lose momentum.

As you progress in your career, your ideas will grow bigger.

Chapter 3: **Problem solving and decision making fall into the spotlight.**

As you move up the ladder in any position, your superiors will start to monitor your ability to problem solve and make effective decisions. Are you using a logical and systematic approach to exploring and resolving issues? Can you identify appropriate sources of information? Do you recognize trends and patterns? Can you see a problem coming and take action quickly?

You've probably seen these questions (or similar questions) on your review form. Simply put, here's what you need to master:

- Identify gaps, issues and opportunities in a given situation.
- Gather information from a variety of critical sources.
- Interpret data and information, identifying patterns, trends and relationships
- Draw sound conclusions consistent with the data.
- Generate potential solutions, considering pros, cons, and costs of each alternative.
- Choose the most appropriate action in a timely manner.

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These are learned skills that aren't always obvious in the beginning. If you don't feel confident in your ability to problem solve, consider finding a mentor that you can emulate or bounce ideas by. Watch superiors that you respect and make mental notes of how they work through issues. Join industry associations and network with peers at other organizations. You can create your own style by picking out what you feel are best practices.

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Chapter 4: **Know your business like the back of your hand.**

In order to be a leader in your business, you have to be strategic. In order to be strategic, you have to know your business like the back of your hand. This takes time but, hey, Rome wasn't built in a day.

Every day you work at your organization, you have an opportunity to learn something new about the company's business, culture and even the industry landscape. The more you understand what your company cares about, and the industry forces that will impact your company, the more you can be proactive about identifying challenges and opportunities for the company. In HR, in particular, you will need to have a firm grasp on corporate culture, its formal and informal rules and power sources.

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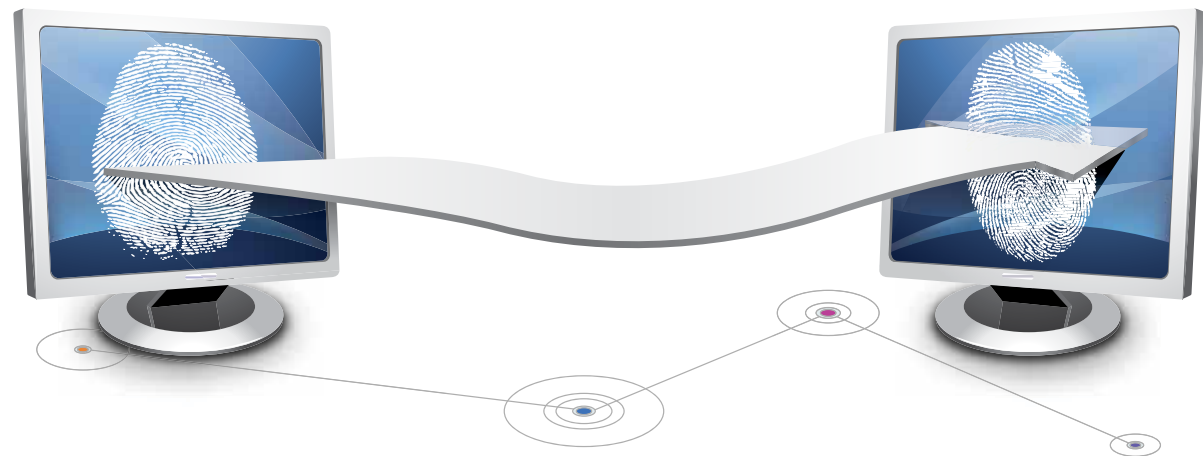
Section: 3
Striving for Greatness

Chapter 1: **Embrace change and guide others through the transition.**

Change is inevitable. Since people (read: talent) are very affected by change, HR leadership has to be able to guide the ship. And it is a tough job. Done correctly, however, HR can actually impact the direction of initiatives and programs to achieve better outcomes within a fast-moving environment. It's in these moments when you need to draw on your foundational and intermediate competencies especially communications skills, conflict management, influence and core business knowledge.

One of my early tests was a group move. Telling a broad swath of employees that they will need to move to keep their jobs is never easy. Before doing anything, I had to consider the impact change will have on the organization as a whole as well as each individual. I mapped out possible scenarios and considered solutions…before the announcement was made.

In a situation like a group move, or any major change, you will need take action quickly and heighten the awareness for a need to change (or at least the benefits of change). You must be clear in your communications to minimize ambiguity and work with partners to make resources available immediately. Always be open to feedback and know that you will have to coach individuals through the change process.

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Chapter 2: **Master the big picture.**

High level leadership is always thinking about the big picture and how the company's strategic systems work together to create, and execute, a vision. You must be able to consider all external and internal environmental factors that impact HR solutions, integrating and aligning them in ways that leverage their interdependencies and maximize their impact on the business.

Great HR leadership understands the corporate system and they create processes that build and reinforce corporate goals. Like the rest of the C-Suite, HR must also think of the bottom line, including short- and long-term cost, benefits, and impact of changes to the whole system. While it's easy to grow complacent in the confines of current systems, good leadership always encourages continuous improvement in system, quality and process across the company as a whole (not just within your department).

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Conclusion

There's no good reason why HR shouldn't have a seat at the leadership table. But, in order to get there, HR professionals must present themselves as a strategic partner to the CEO, CFO, CIO and more. As you work through the ladder, and get bogged down in the day to day, do not forget to focus on your core competencies. It's up to you to build the skills that leadership values. Doing this will not only help you build a successful career in HR, but it will also make for a stronger employment brand and a more successful organization.

Gina Fresolone has more than 20 years of experience in relocation and human resources at Maersk Line Agency USA. As the Director of International Human Resources, Gina managed employee relations, global mobility, talent management, expatriate and inpatriate assignments and the supplier network. Today, Gina serves as the Director of Client Services for XONEX Relocation. She can be reached at **gfresolone@xonex.com.**

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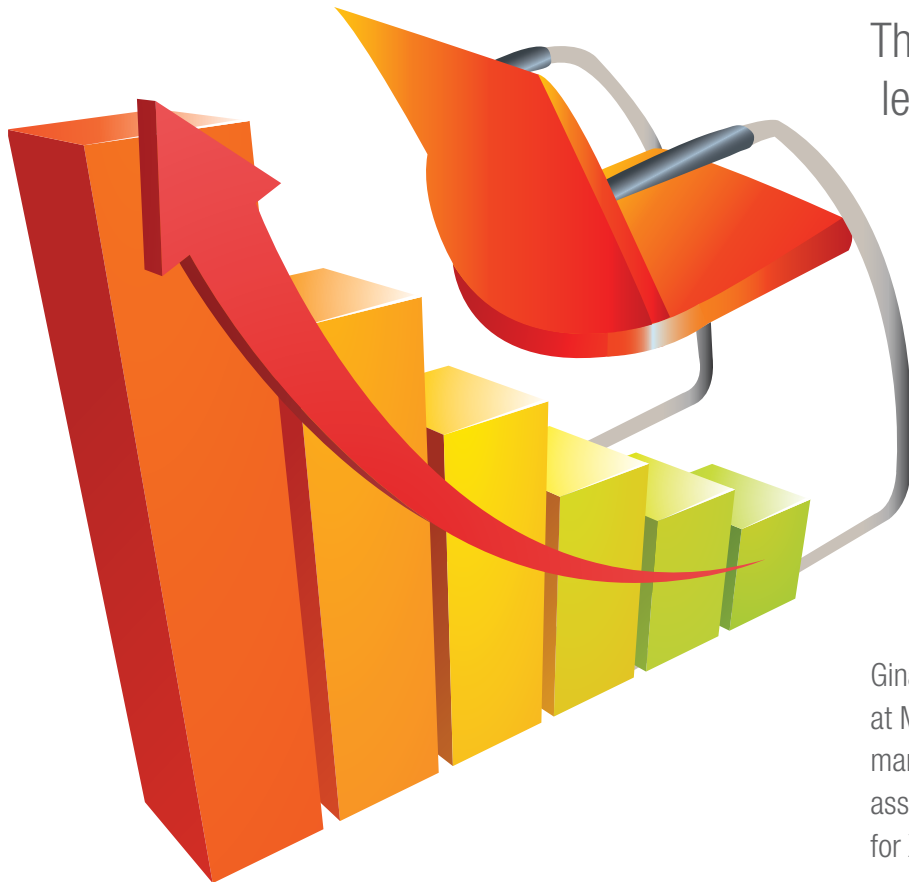
What are the characteristics of a good HR Leader?

☐ 1. Be a business leader

☐ 2. Understand the company's P&L

☐ 3. Be a change agent – get people to think differently!

☐ 4. Be confident, decisive, and action oriented

☐ 5. Be a value-creator and be accountable for results

☐ 6. Be an innovator – develop solutions to today's and tomorrow's issues