

How to be a Player at the Highest Levels

Achieving the Best Possible HR (or other) Career

by David Madison, Ph.D., Director of The Five O'Clock Club National Guild of Career Coaches

The following article is based on a panel presentation at The HR Network, which is sponsored by The Five O'Clock Club. The HR Network is a vendor-free venue for HR professionals to meet informally and hear discussions of important issues of the day.

The panelists were Bill Arlington, Senior Vice President, Human Resources for John Wiley & Sons, Inc.; Harry Glantz, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Human Resources Division, for ITOCHU International Inc.; and Peter Reichman, who, prior to his current role at Russell Reynolds, was Executive Director of HR at UBS Investment Bank.

Although this article is about playing at the highest levels in HR, the advice applies to other functional areas as well.

Looking Out for Your HR Career

How will you be perceived the next time you look for a job? How will you be able to position yourself—based on your track record and



Bill Arlington,
Senior Vice President, Human Resources
for John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

reputation? There's every reason to believe that executive positions will become increasingly competitive. Now more than ever it is important to be career-minded.

Not too long ago there were two finalists under consideration for a Chief Human Resources Officer position. According to a key player in the decision-making process, "Both candidates were experts regarding day-to-day activities. They understood talent management, compensation and benefits, and organizational development. But one was clearly more strategic, collaborative, had better influencing skills and was less narcissistic than the other. These qualities were very important to the CEO who was looking for someone who would be a *solid business partner* for himself and other stakeholders in the organization."

A solid business partner. This appears to be emerging as a gold standard for HR professionals, and as you plan your own career it is important to be aware of what will be crucial over the long haul. If you desire to get to the top in your field, it's vital to be at the top of your game on an on-going basis, and *business partner* will be an important status to achieve.

Do you give much thought to how, why or even if you should get to the top? Maybe you define success in terms of achieving power and prestige. Or perhaps, for you, success means being able to have maximum positive impact on people and their lives. The two probably go hand-in-hand: with power and prestige you are in a better position to create policies that truly help people—if compassion is one of your core values.

After all, HR is responsible for the people capital of an organization, so why not make the most of it? For decades the HR function was confined to such tasks as keeping payroll and benefits in proper order, but surveillance of people capital can mean so much more. *Solid business partner* means tracking and analyzing peo-

ple capital on behalf of the CEO and the board. Using and presenting knowledge effectively can mean all the difference in the trajectory of your own career. Of course, getting to the top might not even be your objective—and there are plenty of folks who have brilliant careers without reaching the highest levels. But even so, being sensitive to the business partner mentality can make all the difference in your ability to be effective.

What are the components of the *solid business partner mentality*? Let's take a brief look at a few.

The business partner mentality can make all the difference in your ability to be effective.

Getting in Tune with the Strategy of the Organization

An expert on our panel explains one of the fundamental challenges: "It is one thing to have a good command of the vari-

Do you have a long-term *vision* for your career? Do you want to get to the top—however that may be defined in your field—or perhaps have aspirations to excel in middle management roles?

Five O'Clock Club research has demonstrated that having a clear *written vision-five, ten fifteen and even forty years out*—can make all the difference in actually reaching concrete goals. Our *Fifteen and Forty Year Vision* exercise can be found on pages 71 to 77 of *Targeting a Great Career*, one of the core books we use with outplacement and retail job hunters.

Whether you're 30 or 60, you owe it to yourself to spend a few hours *writing your Fifteen Year Vision*.

HOW TO BE A PLAYER AT THE HIGHEST LEVELS



Kate Wendleton enjoyed moderating this very impressive panel of HR leaders.

ous HR functions; it is quite another thing to be able to align HR strategy with the strategy of the company. Anyone who aspires to be a player at the highest levels must understand the organization's industry and its business—and really be focused on what is critical to the company and align HR strategy accordingly. Good HR people must consider themselves *business* people. They must be partners with senior management in anticipating staffing needs during times of growth, retrenchment and turbulence." This requires, among other things, understanding the business impact of employees and their jobs. "A good HR professional," the expert continues, "works side by side with senior management on quantifying human capital in terms of return on investment."

To provide this type of input and guidance, knowledge of metrics is essential, i.e., measurements relating to employee



Harry Glantz, Senior Vice President and General Manager, Human Resources Division, for ITOCHU International Inc.

impact and of HR itself.

According to one senior HR officer: "You need to share HR metrics with your CEO, and you need to do this on a regular basis. I prepare what I call a 'state of HR report.' I analyze our department in terms of the people metrics. You have to be able to look at the department budget and see what you're getting for the dollars. But being prepared with company-wide numbers is clearly the most

important element.

We always

want to be able to talk knowledgeably about things like revenue per dollar for employment cost. You want to have these kinds of measures of an organization's productivity. Having these numbers—presenting this kind of mentality—goes a long way toward making it clear that you are a credible business person." Or, as another HR expert explains: "The most important ingredient in success is helping the bottom line. You have to know these numbers, and make

adjustments accordingly. Success in business means creating good jobs to create good companies."

In the example of the two finalists mentioned earlier, basic HR competencies were not the issue: Pushing beyond them is necessary to give thrust and meaning to your career. As one senior HR specialist says, "People expect that you'll know about such things as compensation and benefits, but all that is not enough—not anymore. You have to know how the company makes a profit and how you are going to work with the people who are at the table. This is what HR competency is going to mean in the future."

This level of competency means read-

ing the business press voraciously, including industry magazines: read what your CEO is reading, know what might be keeping the board members up at night. "The last thing you want," one expert warns, "is to make a recommendation at a board meeting about something that has been discussed in the press—but that you didn't notice." Also, based on conversations with the CEO and board members, get a sense of priorities. Find out the three things that currently affect the organization the most. Says one top HR consultant: "We are no longer just personnel people. If



"Going up?"

we aspire to be business people, we have to know the priorities. We need to know what makes the business run, how are we going to mold and enhance talent: how are we going to affect the bottom line?"

Be able to talk knowledgeably about things like revenue per dollar for employment cost.

This also means being knowledgeable about the competition. A seasoned officer advises: "You need to be a person who has a compass perspective. You have to know what your organization's competitors are



Peter Reichman, who, prior to his current role at Russell Reynolds, was Executive Director of HR at UBS Investment Bank.

doing, not just in terms of products and initiatives, but in terms of talent policies. You can assume that competitors are getting sharper on metrics on the talent front. Everybody is competing for intellectual capital, so you've got to be in the game."

The Relationship with the CEO and the Board

Take nothing for granted in your relationship with the CEO and the board. The cast of characters can change, but you can work hard to anchor your status. "Once you have been at the table," one HR expert notes, "you want to get invited back. Never assume that you've made it and can coast." Your security when playing at the highest levels depends on how well you get along with the CEO and the board, but excelling at cocktail parties and on the golf course won't, in most circumstances, be the key. True relationships are more complex than that, and are usually rooted in business trust. It takes savvy to understand the relationship you have with the CEO and the board—and the relationship you *should* be building. Politics and wisdom certainly will come into play. One senior HR officer reflected on the handling of situations that can make you vulnerable: "The compensation committee may be responsible for deciding your boss' salary. Clearly you have to be very very careful in your role. In one situation we relied upon an excellent compensation consultant and a very good employment lawyer. When you're in the middle of things, it's helpful to have such allies. Be sure to study such

situations and strategize accordingly." Maintaining the strong relationship with your CEO usually involves far more than being smart and cordial!

Being Perceived as the Chief People Officer

It's one thing to be in charge of people capital—and that's how your role will be viewed by the CEO and the board. They need your expertise in understanding the talent base, having the facts and figures for evaluating return on investment. The term People Capital Officer is business-speak, of course, but was no doubt invented with these needs in mind.

But what about your usefulness from other perspectives? Not that Chief People Officer has yet ousted Director of Human Resources as a title—and it may never do so—but it's an attempt to suggest your other constituencies. Says one HR professional, "Your job is to represent the people in the company. You actually wear many hats. You do have to be aware of the needs and demands of all the stakeholders, and see issues from many perspectives. But you won't be viewed as an advocate of the employees if you aren't really proactive in that role." Yes, good CEOs want HR leaders who are, as in the example of the two finalists mentioned earlier, "strategic, collaborative, influential and less narcissistic," but they also need strong traditional HR skills—in the sense of being good with people. We've all heard the horror stories of HR officers who don't seem to even like

people—and we do wonder why they're in the field. The traditional focus of HR has been helping employees, and it doesn't do much good to have lots of talent on staff without a sound HR policy designed to bring out the best in people. Another specialist comments: "Experience in working with people is what CEOs are also looking for today. They want to be assured that the HR candidates they're interviewing know how to motivate and engage employees."

For decades HR was understood passively, focused on transactions—or as one HR specialist put it, "HR was viewed as a call center." But playing at the highest levels, truly being a chief people officer means exercising leadership on employee concerns. An HR authority sums up the case as follows: "In addition to being strategic and a business partner, HR needs to be seen by employees as advisors and consultants on vital issues. Employees want to sense that HR professionals are just that: competent, expert, proactive, anticipatory—and vital to the success on issues of employee concern. HR must operate in a swift and decisive manner, and be perceived as influential in the organization, able to move the agenda forward and facilitate necessary change."

We have to know the priorities. We need to know what makes the business run.



HR professionals appreciated the panelists' willingness to talk about their real-life situations.

Keeping Up Appearances

If you want to gain the trust of the CEO and the board, you have to look and act the part—and not just in the sense of always looking sharp. In this regard HR does need to set the tone and the standard, for example, by looking like a business person on dress down days. But that is really a minor issue. Of much greater import is the matter of propriety. The old cliché that ‘actions speak louder than words’ captures a truth about the importance of perceptions. Says one corporate consultant: “People develop perceptions about whether or not you are a credible person—and whether the HR function is credible: are you a trustworthy person to deal with? Propriety is behaving, acting and doing the things that people believe are appropriate to the situation.”

Be aware of the difference between arrogance and confidence. Of course, confidence tends to come with experience and age (maybe!), but it is based heavily on preparation and practice—and the ability to project the image that you desire. Advises one top HR leader: “Speak, sit, enter a room with confidence. Know your topic and your materials. Anticipate—just as political candidates do who are prepar-



The Five O’Clock Club’s Chief Operating Officer, Richard Bayer, and a Club administrator, Angie Cayo, greeted the 120 HR officers as they arrived.

ing to face a town meeting. You don’t want surprise questions, so make sure you’ve done your homework and have the answers.”

Ironically, how you are perceived can be based largely not on how handy you are with advice, but how well you listen—and have the reputation for being a good listener. One expert observes, “Naturally, the ability to advise, explain, make presentations is valuable, but, believe it or not, most people in the company don’t want a lot of advice—especially if they don’t ask for it. They want to know that they are being heard, and that is the role of the HR professional.”

Propriety is behaving, acting and doing the things that people believe are appropriate.

Being in Tune with the Corporate Culture

Are you, in fact, working in the right place? That’s an important reality check. One HR authority observes, “It is necessary to understand, appreciate and respect the corporate culture. It is not necessarily important that you agree with the culture, but you have to respect it.” Frankly, that would be making the best of a bad—or certainly, less than ideal—situation. In planning your career, it is vital to keep fundamentals in mind. The Five O’Clock Club recommends that job hunters try to get three concurrent job offers, in order to have choices—to avoid ending up in a corporate culture that is hard to take and respect. Many factors influence corporate culture, but certainly the philosophy and style of the CEO matter a lot. One senior HR officer reports, “I work with a great CEO. He is an ethical human being who values people. It makes my job a lot easier, and in that environment you absolutely have a real shot of being valued for your HR and business skills and moving into a strategic role.”

Thus a key factor in becoming a player at the highest level is making sure you’re working in the right place.

The Job-Search Buddy System

Do you wish you had someone to talk to—fairly often and informally—about the little things?



“Here’s what I’m planning to do today in my search? What are *you* planning to do? Let’s talk tomorrow to make sure we’ve done it.” You and your job-search buddy could keep each other positive and on track, and encourage each other to do what you told the small group you were going to do: Make that call, send out those letters, write that follow-up proposal, focus on the most important things that should be done—rather than (for example) spending endless hours responding to job postings on the Web.

With your buddy, practice your Two-Minute Pitch, get ready for interviews, bounce ideas off each other. Some job-search buddies talk every day. Some talk a few times a week. Most of the conversation is by phone and e-mail.

Sometimes, people match themselves up as buddies. Just pick someone you get along with in your small group. Sometimes, your coach can match you up. However you do it, stay away from negative people who talk about how bad it is out there. They will drag you down.

The small group changes over time: people get jobs; new people come in. If you lose one buddy who got a job, get another buddy.

Your buddy does not have to be in your field or industry. In fact, being in the same field or industry could keep you focused on the industry rather than on the *process*. But you *do* have to get along! The relationship may last only a month or two, or go on for years. Some buddies become friends.

Of course, you should see your Five O’Clock Club career coach *privately* for résumé review, target development, salary negotiation, and job interview follow-up. It’s usually best to get professional coaching advice for these areas. ●