

## **Lessons learned from bad HR bosses**

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Next to the CEO, the leader of the HR function can be the most influential and important person in an organization. While other leaders typically manage one or two discrete functions, this role works across all functions touching every manager and employee.

A trusted HR executive is confided in and knows more about what's going on in the organization than anyone else. This gives her a unique view of the entire business and puts her in a position to diagnose problems — especially cross-functional ones — and play a key role in the development of solutions.

So why is there still so much discussion about the struggle to gain the business' acceptance to be such a resource? Why are CEOs and other senior leaders so willing to hire expensive external consultants without even exploring whether the skill exists in the HR function?

As internal consultants, HR professionals can develop relationships, and a base of information and insight into the organization that cannot be replicated by external consultants. But while this position inside the organization has its advantages, it also presents additional responsibilities and challenges for HR.

HR functions provide strategic, operational *and* administrative services to every business in the organization. Contrast this with other functions in which strategic roles are played by executives, while day-to-day operations is the responsibility of line managers

Because we have our own function to manage, our leadership skills become very visible to our clients.

We must practice what we preach. We must be the leadership role model in the organization, because if we are not, word will spread. People will wonder how HR can play a larger role in the organization when it has such difficulty running its own operation.

In my 18 plus years as an HR professional I've worked directly with over a dozen HR executives. About half of these leaders truly inspired me. They communicated vision and strategies and created environments in which it was easy for me to empower myself and give everything I possibly could. These leaders coached, provided tough feedback, and even gave me a kick in the pants when necessary — they never shied away from tough conversations. They didn't just implement HR programs and practices in the rest of the organization, they used them with their own teams as well. In addition, these leaders were always looking for ways to increase effectiveness while reducing cost — ever mindful that HR is a cost centre that needs to be as lean as possible.

I watched these HR executives challenge the status quo, tell it like it is, and push even the most senior business leaders outside their comfort zones. They always put service to the

organization before their own self interest. The impact these leaders had on my life and career was significant and still affects me today. And the impact they had on the organization was even more significant.

Unfortunately, I've also worked with, and heard about, the other half — the HR executives who just didn't seem to understand how important it was for them to be good leadership role models.

Take for example, the vice-president of HR who regularly didn't return phone calls from HR managers in the field when they needed and wanted advice and guidance. When one of these managers succeeded in booking a telephone meeting with her, she was a regular no show — no explanations or apologies given. And she didn't behave any better with her clients either.

This incredibly bright and talented woman never asked for feedback on her performance from her clients or her own HR team. She did not give performance feedback or coaching and reacted poorly when questioned or challenged. When a subsidiary business in the organization was sold, she never interacted personally with the HR staff or line executives affected to help them deal with the change.

What kind of message was another HR vice president sending when she was more than 45 minutes late for a meeting with a director-level direct report because she just had to get to that clothing sale at an upscale department store right in the middle of the business day?

How about the HR executive who was not comfortable having difficult performance discussions with his own direct reports and terminated employment without ever engaging in an exploration of the issues?

He was not comfortable having an open-ended discussion with an employee without having complete control and advance knowledge of the outcome.

Imagine the reaction of line executives at another organization when they came to the planning table having reduced next year's operating expenses by 10 per cent - as requested by the CEO in response to shareholder pressure - only to hear the HR executive ask for an 8 per cent increase.

Needless to say, none of these executives were highly regarded and sought after business partners. They were neither trusted nor confided in.

Aside from problems visible to other executives, we need to remember that the members of our HR teams are employees too and they talk about the issues they have with their bosses just like everyone else. When business leaders hear this feedback, as they invariably do, they lose confidence and work around us.

Consider the leadership you are providing to your own function and ask yourself some of these questions:

- Do I model sound operational leadership? Am I searching for ways to improve service while reducing cost? Do I question whether our function is doing the right work or if change is necessary?
- Have I created a vision for HR that has been clearly communicated and understood by my team? Is my team involved in developing strategies, tactics and goals, and do we measure our progress regularly?
- Do I use all HR programs and practices with my own team? The performance management process for example? Pay-for-performance practices?
- Do I provide tough feedback when necessary? Am I a mentor and coach?
- Do I put service to the organization over my own self interest every day?

As HR professionals, we need to ensure we step up to the plate and practise what we preach. One of the best ways to earn the right to play in the upper echelons of the organization is to demonstrate our own phenomenal leadership skills. We need to make sure our own house is in order before we expect to be given the opportunity to work in someone else's backyard.

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