

Credible Activist: Critical Competency

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Introduction:

In their detailed analysis of HR Competencies¹, Ulrich et al identify the role of credible activist as the competency that has the greatest impact on the effectiveness of HR professionals.

The role of credible activist involves both strong individual performance through effective relationships and strong business performance through impacting the effectiveness of the business.

Our own experience confirms that personal credibility combined with the ability to impact the organisation is an essential differentiator between highly effective HR leaders and those who are only technically competent HR professionals.

This article draws on our own experience as well as that of others to explore the role of credible activist and to provide some guidelines for building the capability to effectively perform as a credible activist. In doing so we will discuss what HR leaders need to be to be *credible* and what are the necessary skills that can be developed to influence people in a way that has *impact*.

Credibility:

Personal credibility is less about what you can do and more about who you are. Technical competence is important; but it is not sufficient to earn a seat at the Board room table.

Our experience suggests the following are key to being visibly credible:

- ✚ Defining who you are and what you stand for
- ✚ Defining what your professional offering is and how it adds value
- ✚ Building a personal brand
- ✚ Building and leveraging a network
- ✚ Being master of your craft

We shall discuss each of these in more detail:

¹ David Ulrich et al, 2008, *HR Competencies*, SHRM

Defining who you are and what you stand for:

One of the most remarkable discussions I attended was a CEO Summit in which one of the breakaway questions was: *as a leaders, what do you stand for?* It resulted in some profound insights into what leaders felt was important to them, what this meant to them and how an understanding of this guided their behaviour. In leadership one is forced to make choices; often very difficult ones which demand high levels of courage and conviction. Leaders who stand out are those who are seen to consistently make choices based on what they stand for rather than expediency. It is about the application of deeply held values.

In HR, more any profession, leaders need to understand what they stand for and have the courage to stand by what they stand for. Most people, when asked about what they stand for, will rattle off a number of “motherhood” value statements. However, what determines credibility is behaviour. Highly credible leaders do not spend time talking about values, and frequently would have difficulty articulating their own; but no-one is in any doubt about what they stand for. For such professionals there is little doubt that they would be prepared to give up their jobs if certain lines are crossed.

A key component of what HR professionals stand for has to be that of integrity where HR must play the role of “honest broker” in relationships with stakeholders. This value is reinforced in the SHRM research. Delivering results on its own is not sufficient – integrity and sustainability are essential in the process of delivering results.

Defining what your professional offering is and how it adds value:

In most of my programmes I begin with an exercise in which participants have to design a web site for themselves. They only have to prepare two pages:

Who am I?

What products and services do I offer?

As HR professionals are increasingly expected to fulfill the role of internal consultant, these questions become all important.

Most people in a corporate environment have great difficulty defining who they are and what their products and services are.

In most cases, in response to “who am I?”, a traditional CV is produced setting out their job history. Not only is that insufferably boring but it tells your “client” absolutely nothing about what you have achieved, what you stand for and why they should have confidence that you can help solve their problem.

Participants find the challenge to describe their products and service – ie value proposition to the organisation – profoundly difficult. Yet it is this that largely defines their professional identity and credibility.

Professional consultants are normally very clear about what they offer and the better amongst them define what they offer in terms of the value it adds to the client.

HR Leaders need to create a resume which sets out their achievements and what they stand for and which builds confidence in their ability to solve their clients problem. We would suggest that in the future internal HR consultants will have their own web pages on a corporate intranet which they will have to design and maintain and which will be a basis for marketing their services, possibly on a competitive basis.

Building your Professional Brand:

Everyone has a brand. People who meet you for the first time and those that have known you for a long time have made value judgments about you and respond to you on the basis of these judgments. How you project yourself and communicate your identity matters.

There are a number of books on personal branding but the following are some key elements of building a personal and professional brand;

- ✓ Become a credible source. Make sure that the information you communicate and the knowledge you share is useful and up to date. Become a master of your craft.
- ✓ Become a great communicator. Most really successful people have the ability to communicate very effectively, whether to a group or to individuals. It is a skill that can be learned.
- ✓ Prepare a 30 second “elevator speech”. Be able to explain what you do and how you add value to potential clients (eg the CEO when you meet in the lift) within 30 seconds. Once you have someone’s attention you can elaborate.
- ✓ Build your internal and external networks and build an identity beyond your internal corporate persona.

- ✓ Dress for the job you aspire to. Few things tell a “client” more about you than your dress. Really successful professionals dress appropriately but are always smart.
- ✓ Become a “class act”. Be able to practice social and professional etiquette with sophistication.

There are many more aspects to the notion of professional branding but it should always be remembered that competence alone will only take you so far. People who sit at the Board Room table have achieved it with far more than simply technical and professional competence.

Building and Leveraging a Network:

Helen Nicholson, one of South Africa’s foremost authorities on networking, says:

“In the business world people focus too much on what they know rather than realizing who they know and who those people know is what is going to take their career to the next level”.

Networking is about building a web of relationships that can be utilized to greatly enhance effectiveness. It is about creating an external neuro-system, in which all parts of your personal and professional web connect.

Networking is not simply getting to know more people or being a part of a social circuit. It is about leveraging relationships that can be of benefit to both you and members of your network.

Whilst there is an art and a science to networking, the most important principle of effective networking is to understand where you can add value to others rather than what you can get from others. Really successful, credible professionals are constantly connecting other people in ways that enhance their whole network.

Being master of your Craft:

Whilst professional competence is not a sufficient condition for high level credibility, it is a critical necessity.

HR, like many professions, is constantly changing. Most importantly, in most organisations the roles of HR are changing fundamentally in that the traditional knowledge base of transactional HR are being relocated to centralized services. Those remaining in the role of business partner and specialist are required to have a very different knowledge and skills base. This means, not only are HR professionals having to embrace new knowledge, but they need deep understanding of subjects such as

organisational design and social change in order to provide solutions for the kinds of problems that their organisations are facing.

It is not possible to be credible if you do not possess the deep knowledge and skills which underpin your profession; and these cannot be learned from attending a few short courses. This means continuous formal and informal study and attendance at cutting edge seminars and other interventions in the same way that credible medical practitioners or lawyers maintain their knowledge base.

Making an Impact:

The second aspect of Credible Activist is that of having an impact.

Many people believe that, because they are very busy, work long hours and respond to numerous crises and issues, they are having an impact. Unfortunately, this is particularly prevalent in the HR profession. This is a fallacy.

Making an impact is closely related to the notion of transformational leadership. People who make an impact are able to articulate what is different as a result of their having fulfilled a particular role rather than what they do on an ongoing basis in that role. Furthermore, this impact is defined not in terms of operational achievements (eg how many people were recruited in a given period) but systemically and strategically (eg how was the recruitment system reconfigured to attract key talent or how many women are now in leadership positions compared to when I started in the role).

Another fallacy is that impact must result in or from some physical action. Again, nothing could be further from the truth. Impact results largely from the art of conceptualizing complex issues and persuading people to take certain actions.

In order to have impact a number of skills are required. However the following are most critical:

- ✓ Understanding the business and the business issues
- ✓ Systemic problem solving ability
- ✓ Persuasive communication
- ✓ Relationship chemistry
- ✓ Execution

Understanding the Business & Business Issues:

This is rather obvious and something that HR professionals are often criticized for not displaying.

However, having a broad understanding of the business is not sufficient. To have impact, it is necessary to be able to identify, quantitatively, what the key issues are and what needs to be done to change the current reality or respond to some future reality. This implies a strong understanding of the key metrics that drive the business and in particular the people aspects of the business. Rather than a general talent management strategy, the effective professional will have identified the number and type of talented people required in specific parts of the business by when and why and will have devised a strategy to achieve these objectives.

By identifying the business needs of the organisation quantitatively, the HR professional is establishing their own mandate for the next 2 – 3 years. This in turn differentiates those who have impact from those who simply do an acceptable job. Highly impactful people work to a mandate rather than to a job description. They ensure that they understand what the organisation requires and hence what is their mandate, and then, through transformational leadership, set out to deliver on their mandate.

Systemic Problem Solving:

There is a substantial difference between operational and systemic problem solving processes. Systemic problem solving requires an ability to understand the notion of multiple causality and the ability to dissolve problems through the redesign of the system in such a way that the problem no longer exists.

My programmes are always designed around the proposition that HR professionals need 2 toolboxes. One should be filled with frameworks that enable him or her, as well as their clients, to make sense of the complex, often abstract problems they encounter. The other should be filled with processes to facilitate joint problem solving.

This reinforces the idea that impact is not necessarily always about physical action but about mental action involving conceptualizing problems and their solutions with the rigor of the discipline.

Persuasive Communication:

It goes without saying that communication is one of the most important tools for having an impact on an organisation. Ulrich's RBL Group states in their HR Toolkit (www.rbl.net) that information sharing is a large part of becoming a Credible Activist. Credibility is gained by HR professionals who can effectively communicate information and ideas. This includes verbal, written and non verbal communication; it involves

communicating with groups and with individuals; most importantly, what differentiates the average communicator from the highly skilled professional is the ability to persuade.

In his book *Life's a Pitch*, Stephen Bagley makes the following point:

"Life is not a pattern of gradually evolving improvement. It is a series of long fallow patches punctuated by moments of crucial change. How you handle the fallow stretches doesn't matter much. How you handle the moments of change is vital. These big moments ... are decided by how you handle them."

To have impact it is essential that HR transformational leaders get others on board to institute crucial change. Hence the art and science of communication is fundamental to having an impact.

There are many good books written about communication, but two things are important in persuasive communication, whatever the medium used.

Firstly, really successful communicators begin with where the target audience is. Many, who are less successful, start with the idea and hope that it will sell itself on its own merits. Often, they wonder why the audience did not connect with what they were trying to say.

Secondly, successful communicators recognise that persuasion is largely about emotions rather than facts and figures. They recognise that their role is to create a *feeling* of dissatisfaction with the current reality and create a *feeling* of confidence in their ability to create a better reality in the future. Whilst information is certainly critical as a means to that end, it is the emotional response to the communication that will determine the impact.

To be a credible activist, HR professionals need to master the ability to communicate persuasively through whatever medium is required. It is probably the most important tool in the arsenal of any successful HR professional who sits at the Boardroom table.

Relationship chemistry:

The RBL Group states in their HR Toolkit (www.rbl.net) that the credible activist is adept at creating an atmosphere of trust that results in the development of "good chemistry" with constituents. Trust is the result of integrity, reliability, the ability to keep confidences, etc). Relationship chemistry creates the basis for all interaction in the business and the lack of this could minimize the impact and effort of the HR

professional severely. Good interpersonal relationships with both individuals and teams provide the oil for doing HR with an attitude. It creates a platform for the HR professional to take appropriate risks, both personally and for the company. It also makes it easier to share candid observations that might differ from other business leaders and could provide valuable input to strategy. Without relationship chemistry it is very difficult to be a true strategic HR business partner.

Execution:

Over the past three months we have conducted many critical incident interviews in South Africa with senior executives and without fail the biggest differentiator between an effective and non-effective HR professional is perceived to be execution. Most of the executives agreed with Larry Bossidy & Ram Charan who point out that leaders placed too much emphasis on what some call high-level strategy, on intellectualizing and philosophizing, and not enough on implementation. People would agree on a project or initiative, and then nothing would come of it². The influence an HR professional can have on the business is magnified when good communication, customer-centricity and creativity turns into action. This involves not only understanding business issues, problem-solving and persuasiveness, but the ability to harness the necessary resources to put all the ideas into action. The most frustrating HR professional of all is the one who is all talk and no execution – ask any executive! Execution is one of the most important priorities of a Credible Activist. “Execution is a systematic process of rigorously discussing hows and whats, tenaciously following through, and ensuring accountability.”³

Conclusion:

Research by Ulrich et al cited at the start of this article shows decisively that the role of credible activist is the most critical in achieving success in the HR profession.

Research by the Corporate Leadership Council supports this. It shows that the most important factor in determining the effectiveness of the HR function is the effectiveness of the Business Partner role. The effectiveness of the HR Business Partner is shown to be 54% a result of the profile of the person and 43% a result of the design of the job.

² Bossidy & Charan, 2002, Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done,

³ Bossidy & Charan, 2002, Execution: The Discipline of Getting Things Done,

For the HR profession to take its place at the Boardroom table, it is essential that HR professionals set transformational leadership and their personal effectiveness as an ongoing developmental priority to enable them to fill the role of credible activist.