

HR Consulting: Key Skills for the HR Professional

Terry Meyer 2009

The role of the HR practitioner as an internal consultant is becoming generally accepted. Titles such as HR Consultant, performance consultant and OD consultant, amongst others, are common place in most HR functions in organisations. What is less obvious is what the skills and behaviours of successful internal consultants are and how internal

The frequent credibility gap between what managers expect of their HR professionals and what they are seen to deliver as well as the prolific use of external consultants by organisations suggests that HR professionals have a strong need to build their consulting skills and behaviours to remain competitive in an increasingly complex world.

One of the most important criteria for effective internal consulting is the mindset that is required to move from an approach which prioritizes the implementation of HR processes to a client driven, solutions driven approach. Instead of focusing on the processes as point of departure, internal consultants begin with the client and his or her problem as the point of departure and focus on crafting a solution to the problem. This is not to say that best practice HR processes are not important: they are. However, there is a need to avoid the common problem of the “tail wagging the dog” where the need for conformance to policy and process continues and grows in importance well beyond its original purpose.

In my article in the January and February issues of HR Futures I argued that the HR function (as with many “Corporate” service functions) would derive a number of benefits by repositioning itself as an internal professional services firm. These include:

- ✓ Its core business becomes HR consulting, and, through this, adding value to the client business, rather than being an “add on” to the core business of the client.
- ✓ It requires a complete mind set shift to focusing on the client’s needs and the value proposition of the services it can offer, rather than continually trying to justify its existence as a minor player in a different business. It also assists in identifying those activities that are non value adding but often get “dumped” onto HR.
- ✓ It requires a management approach which equates in many ways to commercial professional consulting companies. This includes client contracting, proper costing and charge out processes, service level agreements, service based performance management and the provision of appropriate specialist and consulting skills which add value to the client.

Such an approach would require the function to manage itself as an internal business and apply the management principles that have made good professional services firms so successful.

However, even in relatively traditional roles the fact remains that consulting skills and behaviours are an essential part of the HR professionals toolbox.

In my experience, whether as business partner or center of excellence, the following are some of the important consulting skills that professionals need:

Create a value proposition:

Many traditional HR professionals have great difficulty defining what value they offer to the business. Very often their perceived value is expressed in terms of the processes they run or the role they fulfill.

It is essential that HR professionals understand the contribution they make to the business. For each process or role they need to keep probing “why” they are doing what they do. The performance management process, for example is not an end in itself. It is one of a number of vehicles leaders can use to create a high performance organisation which will deliver on the business strategy.

Furthermore, it is important that HR professionals respond to current problems the organisation and its management are faced with. In a time of financial crisis what is the HR professional doing to improve productivity, reduce costs, improve revenue and support the organisation through change leadership.

I often ask participants in HR Executive Education programmes that I run to design their own web page. Many struggle and have great difficulty. However, increasingly, defining your contribution to the business will become essential.

Professional Branding:

Many highly competent HR professionals are never heard because no one knows they are there or what they are capable of.

Everyone has a brand. Their brand is what others think about them and what others think they stand for. To be an effective consultant it is necessary to build a personal brand which sets one apart from the “crowd” and which forms the basis for one’s ability to influence effectively.

In addition to an internal brand it is important to build an external brand and to be “connected” into important professional networks.

Dress, etiquette, behaviour and being a master of your craft are some of the factors that contribute to your brand – consciously or not.

Highly effective consultants have clear branding strategy which sets them apart as leaders in their field. How many times does your name come up on Google when you do a search?

Client Relationships:

In many organisations client problems are raised on an informal basis by line managers and as part of the “team” the HR professional is expected to deal with them. Without clearly understanding client expectations problems soon occur.

Effective consultants spend considerable time clarifying client needs and expectations and continually managing expectations. They know that very often clients try to abdicate their responsibilities by asking HR to deal with the issue. They know that very often the problem that a client identifies is frequently a symptom of a more systemic problem. They know that what a client wants and what a client needs are very often two different things.

By functioning as an internal consultant an HR professional can build a close professional relationship with a client whilst maintaining professional distance.

It is my view that internal consultants should spend as much time agreeing with clients the problem, scope, process to be followed and deliverable to be achieved as an external consultant and this should be in writing in the form of a written proposal.

Understand Consulting Roles:

The traditional role of an HR professional has been as expert consultant. That is the professional diagnoses the problem and provides the client with a solution based on his or her expertise. This is a perfectly valid consulting role. However, many kinds of problem require a process consulting role which is very different to that of expert consultant. It requires a sophisticated approach to understanding the problem and working with the client to enable a solution to evolve in a very non directive way – even if the consultant knows the answer to the issue!

The key is to know which approach is appropriate in different circumstances and have the ability to move from one mode to the other according to the needs of the situation.

Systemic Problem Solving:

In their new role, HR consultants are increasingly being required to solve complex, often multi-functional, business problems, rather than implement traditional HR processes. An understanding of systems thinking and strategic problem solving is therefore a key skill which consultants need to demonstrate.

In an environment characterized by complexity and rapid and discontinuous change, HR professionals need to be able to understand and apply the principles of organisational design to enable the organisation to respond rapidly in times of change and uncertainty.

Frameworks & Processes:

Effective consultants need to have two toolboxes.

Firstly, one which provides him or her with access to frameworks that can assist their clients to understand the nature of their problems. This is particularly necessary in the HR profession as many of the issues are intangible and need to be made visible and concrete through the use of such frameworks.

Secondly, one which enables the consultant to apply a number of different facilitation processes and techniques to deal with organisational issues. Facilitation skills are one of the most important skills required of any consultant / HR professional.

Master of their Craft:

In whatever field of HR the internal consultant specializes or provides a service, they require a deep understanding of their profession. They need to be masters of their craft and continually build their knowledge to remain on the cutting edge of their field.

In a knowledge economy personal competence becomes the currency of one's trade. Clients cannot have confidence in people who are not deeply knowledgeable in their field.

Conclusion:

To influence through leadership rather than compliance with legislation or policy is what organisations are going to increasingly demand of their HR professionals. The whole notion of business partner or center of excellence is based on that assumption.

There are many more skills that HR professionals need to demonstrate if they are to fulfill Dave Ulrich's roles. However, in all the roles identified in his competency

framework, the ability to provide solutions rather than simply implement processes is central.