



Internal Branding during turbulent times

- Prasenjit Bhattacharya

Recently, someone sent me an article by a well known academician - a thought leader who has been a champion of positioning HR as a strategic business partner. The premise of the article is that HR's first priority is to help in delivering business results by enabling the organization to align people with the business goals.

In study after study we read about why it is important for HR to be the strategic business partner. The same studies would also point out that only in a very few organizations HR are, in fact, strategic business partners. Wayne Brockbank in a decade old article talks about moving HR from an "operationally reactive" role to a "strategically proactive" role.

Then again, which function should not aspire to be a strategic business partner? If you ask procurement, administration, information technology, corporate communication, financeany function, they will all say that their function should be a strategic business partner. Understanding business, getting people aligned to the business, and being "strategically proactive" (whatever it means) is a requirement of every function.

HR has to be a strategic business partner, but that is not, in my opinion, the pinnacle at the end of a long journey of going through different phases. What is common to every function cannot be the distinguishing feature for one function. What then, is the distinguishing feature of HR?

First and foremost, in my opinion, it is the ability to look at the organization from employees' point of view.

A sales manager has sales goals to achieve. Since in most cases he cannot force people to buy, he has to think of a value proposition which is a win-win for both- the potential customer and the organization. Purchase looks at a value proposition for both the organization and the suppliers, Finance looks at a similar proposition for the investors and the organization and so on.

In the name of being a strategic business partner to the organization, some of these functions started tilting the balance significantly in favour of the organization, and against the stakeholder. For example, I bought a Blackberry phone some time back. When the phone stopped working and I went back to the Company which had supplied it, I was informed that the phone has to be sent to Bangalore for at least 10 days since they do not have repair facilities in Mumbai. "How do I work in the interim," I asked? "You will have to buy another Blackberry, sir, if you want to use the Blackberry function," pat came the reply. The person in the counter knew that in absence of number portability, I cannot easily switch to a rival Company. Is this just bad customer care or is the sales function trying to be a "strategic business partner" and achieve his business goals?

You will say that this is not what the term “strategic business partner” means and organization goals cannot be just short term revenue or sales maximisation. But we are all aware of how orders are booked in March, in advance, to meet the year end targets (paper invoicing), how some companies announce record sales month after month, and do not disclose record levels of churn or attrition. Allow me to take this idea to the HR function.

At the height of the boom period in early 2008, a theory gained ground that for high growth-high attrition environments, people, particularly at lower levels in the organization, can be treated as resources, and supply chain principles work, just as it works for any other resource. Shorn of the frills, the gist was that people are replaceable resources and planning demand and supply, using supply chain principles is the way to meet business need.

While using supply chain principles and tools like six sigma does make the recruitment process more effective, treating people like any other resource is an amazingly bad idea, even without going into the ethics of it. Consider the experience of a batch of MBA trainees in an organization operating in the retail space. After waiting for 6 months, when they were finally inducted to the organization, they were given a one day induction and put on the job. At campus they were asked to give their preference of the functions they wish to join. Most of them found that there was no match between their preference and the function allocated. HR or senior managers are not easily accessible. There was no functional training given before putting them on the job. On the one hand, they could not answer the queries of customers, on the other hand there is a lot of pressure on them to cross sell more and more services to customers. Rather than hear constant abuse from their managers, many of them have taken the easy way out by convincing their parents and relatives to buy products and services of their organization. Almost all have applied elsewhere, but in the current economic situation, only a few have got offers. The irony of the situation is that these people are not likely to be asked to leave the organization either because the organization weeds out “non-performers” once a year, and since they have joined recently they have at least one year to grumble about the organization, while searching for a better job.

HR function that is simply playing the role of a “strategic business partner” by “aligning” employees with the business strategy without “engaging” them may help achieve business results for some time, with grievous long term damage to the organization. Some CEOs may like to get rid of fuzzy concepts like engagement, fairness or trust in favour of alignment with business results. Alignment without engagement is like a prison where you have to serve a specific term before you get out. Why settle for one when you can have both?

Thankfully, we have organizations who are engaging and aligning people in equal measure. Every year we have newer examples to learn from. Two things that come to my mind about many of these organizations are their ability to inspire employees and their ability to listen to their employees.

Organizations like Google and NTPC are known for their aspiration to change the world or the country for the better. However, such aspirations are not limited to new age technology companies or to large organizations. Most organizations are making a

positive difference to the world. Some may not know it though! I was interacting with a group of managers from my accounting firm who complained that their work was not inspiring. I got a few of their well known customers to talk to them. Many of them talked about how when they started their business they were unknown people, and how the firm helped them to negotiate the tricky world of corporate compliance and held their hands even though their size, and therefore the accounting firm's revenues from them was small. "I am not going to change them for any price. They were with me when I needed them most," commented one of their customers. Most employees of FedEx, for example, do not do work using cutting edge technology, but most are passionate about their customers.

At the end of the day what sets many of the great workplaces apart from the rest is their willingness to listen to their employees. Fred Smith of FedEx personally fields uncensored employee questions, as do the founders of Google. Nor is this a function of size. One of the largest IT companies in India has completely revamped their employee feedback process this year involving a third party global organization to reach out to all employees. This organization believes that it is just as important to know what employees feel and want, as it is to track how aligned they are with the business goals. Indeed the two are linked.

So if you are an HR professional, being a strategic business partner is not just about helping the organization align people to business, it is about winning the hearts and minds of people. Indeed, that is the only sustainable way of aligning people to business.

Prasenjit Bhattacharya is CEO of The Great Place to Work® Institute, India. Views expressed are personal. He can be contacted at pbhattacharya@greatplacetowork.in