

Leading the way



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by Glain Roberts-McCabe

5 ways to lead in a complex world



Glain Roberts-McCabe, Founder and President of The Roundtable, discusses how HR professionals can help themselves (and others) meet the demands of today's complex world of work.

How do you champion people and, at the same time, protect the company's interests? How do you help organizations meet their strategic imperatives without burning people out? How do you encourage leaders to develop themselves and, at the same time, not take their eye off the ball when it comes to hitting productivity targets?

These are the kinds of conversations that I find myself having on a regular basis as I work with senior HR leaders on their people strategies. The role of HR is a tricky balancing act between managing the needs and demands of the organization with the needs and demands of an increasingly purpose-driven employee audience. Over

the past 20 years, I've witnessed a shift in focus as functional HR has evolved from a tactical business unit to the driving force of strategic change, talent and culture. Today, we are in the Age of Collaboration, and HR, like all other business functions, has to rise to the challenge of a VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous) world that demands agility at an aggressive pace. This requires a shift in the mindsets and behaviours of many HR professionals to transition from 'supporting' the business to 'leading' the business through an adaptable and flexible people agenda.

Gone are the days of 'annual' performance reviews, employee engagement surveys or anything else that is done on a 'too little, too late' cycle. Today, HR leaders are expected to anticipate where the business is trending, what the implications are for talent and how to enable people to meet the challenge. No easy task. Here are five ways that HR professionals can meet (and help others meet) the demands of today's complex world of work.

[1]

Know the business first

One of the biggest trends I've observed is that more and more line leaders are transitioning into the HR function. This is great news for the profession as it's a visible demonstration that HR is being seen as a crucial player at the strategic table. It's not great news if you're an HR leader with zero line experience. It is mission critical for HR practitioners to get beyond the bubble of HR and walk a few miles in the shoes of an overtaxed and overburdened business unit employee to truly understand the 'language' of the business. I believe that if we want to see a chief HR officer ultimately step into a CEO role, HR leaders are going to have to get their hands dirty in the line or risk being overlapped by line leaders taking their place at the 'people agenda' table.



[2]

Don't coddle

In today's workplaces, where silos are imploding, data is overwhelming and uncertainty and ambiguity are rampant, employees at all levels need to be adept at building and navigating relationships. As a direct result, emotional intelligence (EQ) is solidly trumping IQ, and HR can no longer be the place to 'outsource' challenging people discussions. Too many HR leaders will say 'my people aren't ready to... [fill in the challenging people-related blank]'. Well, as a line leader myself, I'd say it's time 'your people' sucked it up. Interpersonal skills are non-negotiable. Too many HR leaders are operating like 'helicopter' parents—making things too comfortable for their leaders because they're 'not ready'. This bottlenecking of skills is not going to help leaders in the long run. We learn more outside of our comfort zones, so help your people get comfortable with being uncomfortable. It is a business imperative that HR shifts from being the 'doer' of these conversations to being the strategic coach to leaders who need to have these conversations.

[3]

Think team vs. individual development

When it comes to developing talent, we are still mostly stuck in an 18th-century school house mindset where learning is primarily focused on the individual. In today's collaborative workplaces, most key learning opportunities centre on the need to shift mindsets, attitudes and behaviours. And, let's face it, these are the things that are the hardest to develop. They're even more difficult to develop without the support of those around you. As an executive coach, I've seen that it's nearly impossible for people to make a new behaviour stick if colleagues aren't actively aware of, looking for and supporting the new behaviour. We need to stop learning in isolation and start learning collectively.

[4]

Beware vanity metrics

'It's all about data', especially in HR where putting hard ROI measures around seemingly 'soft' initiatives can be a moving target. However, before you spend thousands of hours tracking data that isn't going to impress bottom-line-oriented business executives, dig in and understand what metrics really matter. Then, pick those two to three things that really drive the business and measure them. The rest is just data that might sound cool, but is really quite meaningless. As one marketing leader once said to me: "Hits on a website stands for how idiots track success". Ouch.

[5]

Be courageous

The biggest issue facing today's workplaces, from my vantage point, is the brutal rise of mental health issues at work. At The Roundtable, we work primarily with leaders who are on the fast track. Whether you call them high potentials, accelerated learners or key contributors, the common trait is they're the people you want at the table. Over the past two years I've seen more and more of these 'best and brightest' burning out and checking out. With pressures on performance and productivity seemingly growing at a relentless pace, it is here that we need the balanced and courageous voice of HR. This is the opportunity to connect the dots for boards, shareholders and overly ambitious line executives on how to balance the productivity agenda with the people agenda. It's critical to challenge unsustainable expectations.

And it's this final point that is possibly the most difficult role for HR professionals today and yet the most crucial. It requires a level of heroic leadership. To be successful, HR leaders will need to speak the language of the business with the data to back it up, have the skills to persuade and the courage to be an unpopular voice at the table. People across organizations are counting on you. **HRE**

Glain Roberts-McCabe is Founder and President of The Roundtable, a group and team coaching organization where leaders develop their leadership, together. She is a passionate supporter of the HR function.

