HEAD
HEART
+BRAIN

The Success Profile for
HR leaders

+ What are the skills, knowledge and attributes of highly successful HR Leaders? What is the difference that makes the difference between the best and the rest?

Since 2004 the team at Head Heart + Brain have been working successfully with the results of a study we conducted into what it takes to be an exceptional, high performing HR Business Partner*. The findings from that study have proved so useful in helping our clients recruit and develop talented HR Business Partners that we decided to use the same methodology to gain an equal understanding of what it takes to be a great HR Leader.

Armed with an understanding of what the very best HR Leaders do and how they see themselves in their roles, we believed organisations would be in a much stronger position to identify and recruit real talent into the crucial HR Director position. As importantly, it would enable them to groom their most talented HR Business Partners for transition to the top.

Throughout 2008, the team conducted a global study of HR Leaders, using The Success Profile methodology. Since then the study has been updated and verified with clients. This report describes how the study was conducted and what results were found.

How the study was conducted

The population

The study began with an initial group of 30 HR Leaders from a range of industries across the public and private sectors in Europe, America and South Africa. We continue to add to the population. All participants held senior HR Leadership positions at HR Director level either for the whole enterprise or for a distinct part of a high profile company with a reputation for success as a business. Most companies were upper quartile in their sector in terms of return on investment and many of the HR Directors had been hired to transform HR. 56% of the population were male and 44% female.

Data collection

Participants were interviewed in depth using The Success Profile methodology which drills deeply into their most and least successful experiences in their role. Although similar to the process by which competency frameworks are developed, our process goes beyond the actions and behaviour exhibited. It discovers the capabilities people drew on in deciding which actions to take, the underlying beliefs and values that drove those decisions and what their sense of identity or purpose was at the time. This produces a rich, multi-dimensional picture of all the conditions that generate success.

Analysis

The data was analysed by searching for the consistent patterns within each individual's experience and, subsequently, between participants across the population. We looked for what was consistently present or absent in multiple descriptions of both successful and unsuccessful incidents.

It should be noted that no attempt was made to codify the leadership style of HR Leaders or compare HR Leaders to leaders of other functions or businesses. In common with all other leaders, HR Leaders work with a variety of management styles, however, we noted that as a group, the participants in this study tended to be more towards the facilitative than the authoritarian end of the spectrum.

Overview of findings

Profile

+ Some biographical statistics that emerged suggest a number of similarities within the population: Great HR Leaders do not get to the top in one organisation and stop there:

+ 73% had held a senior HR leadership position elsewhere prior to their current role

Diverse experience is the norm:

+ 64% had relevant business experience outside of HR

+ 50% had experience of working outside their country of origin around the world

+ 50% had worked in multiple sectors

An HR qualification is not an absolute requirement:

+ 46% held no formal HR qualification

Approach

We found that HR Leaders establish their credibility and build the foundation for future influence from three different perspectives. For some the primary focus is being a business person, for others it is building relationships and for the rest it is as a facilitator and coach. In spite of having preferred starting points, participants recognised the need to be able to use all three approaches flexibly to earn respect with a wide range of people in a variety of organisations.
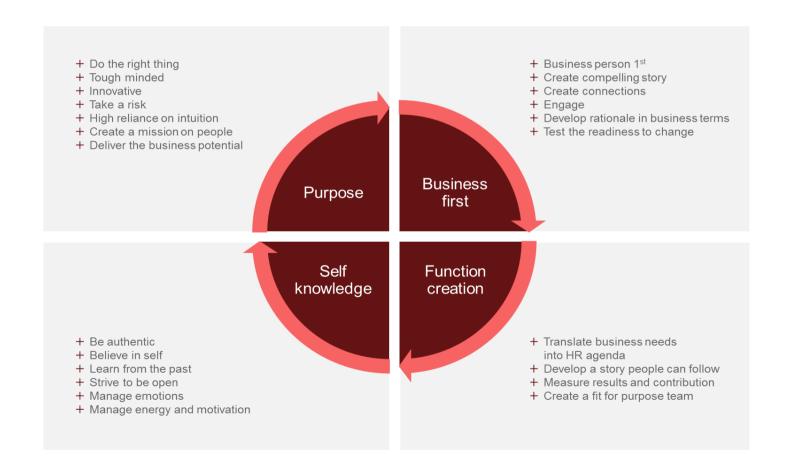
Mindset

We found among great HR Leaders that their "mindset" - how they define their purpose in the organisation and what they believe about themselves, the HR function and its contribution to the success of the business - is more important than the technical skills and knowledge they have amassed over their careers.

The best HR Leaders share four defining
characteristics:

Success Factor	Definition and summary quote
Purpose	**A clear vision about what they are there to do and a willingness to go out to the edge to achieve it** "Successful HR Leaders know what they want to achieve and they do what it takes to make it happen."
Business first	**See themselves as business people first and holding themselves accountable for creating business success** "High performing HR Leaders are business people first and HR people second."
Function creation	**Creating a fit-for-purpose HR function and leading it to deliver success for the business through the people strategy** "High performing HR Leaders build deep functional capability to deliver the people strategy."
Self knowledge	**Continually seek better self awareness and to understand their strengths, weaknesses, beliefs and values and to strive to act on them** "Successful HR Leaders know, trust and take care of themselves."

These patterns, in common with all our other findings,
were consistent across sectors and industries.

Leading HR
– the model

+ Do the right thing
+ Tough minded
+ Innovative
+ Take a risk
+ High reliance on intuition
+ Create a mission on people
+ Deliver the business potential

+ Business person 1st
+ Create compelling story
+ Create connections
+ Engage
+ Develop rationale in business terms
+ Test the readiness to change

Purpose

Business first

Self knowledge

Function creation

+ Be authentic
+ Believe in self
+ Learn from the past
+ Strive to be open
+ Manage emotions
+ Manage energy and motivation

+ Translate business needs into HR agenda
+ Develop a story people can follow
+ Measure results and contribution
+ Create a fit for purpose team

Sense of purpose

+ Three key themes emerged in terms of how the HR Leaders defined their purpose in the organisation:

+ Ensure the organisation has the right talent in the right place at the right time

+ Create a people strategy for the business, not an HR agenda

+ Transform the business to meet its full potential

As importantly, when they described how they go about fulfilling this purpose, they consistently mentioned a heavy reliance on intuition and a willingness to take risks, innovate and go out on a limb to make the right things happen. This was coupled with a passion for what they do, tough-mindedness and a fierce desire to be involved only where they could make a difference.

+ Sample quotes on sense of purpose...

"I am not at my best unless I am sure of my purpose"
"HR's role is to both use and protect the company DNA to achieve success"
"Be visionary, spot opportunities and think differently"
"Reinvent the top of the organisation"
"Make choices about focus"
"Don't be constrained by current practice"

Business first

One of the strongest messages that came through from the HR Leaders was that they think of themselves as business people first and HR people second. They define their role as leaders in the business, not implementers for the business. They have a part to play in setting the overall business direction and goals before gearing up their own part of the organisation to deliver what is needed to achieve them.

In preparing for change, most HR Leaders described a clear series of steps they follow: they create a compelling story about how the business can reach its long-term potential; they create and use strong networks of connection; they work hard to engage and inspire key stakeholders; and they carefully access and influence the organisation's readiness to act on the change agenda.

Sample quotes on Business focus...

"You have to understand what value is and approach the work as a business person first"
"By being a business person first, I have the freedom to develop HR's scope"
"Create a compelling story"
"Experience of the business gains trust"
"HR initiatives only make sense if they can be measured in terms of business outcomes"
"What are we doing, where will this take us what will the business get from this?"

Function creation

+ Not surprisingly, all the participants in the study shared a focus on creating a strong HR function beneath them. They consistently sought to create teams with a business oriented approach to HR and deep capability to deliver business results through the people agenda. They achieved this by retelling their business story in a way that was compelling for the HR team and brought them along on the leader's cause.

Effectiveness, cost-effectiveness, accountability for producing measurable results and bottom line contribution were common qualities they wanted their HR functions to be known for. The teams they described having put together varied widely according to the purpose they were required to serve, the nature of the business and the individual HR Leader's style and focus. All participants described this as a dynamic and iterative process.

+ Sample quotes on Function creation...

"You need to take people with you by talking about what will work"
"Create a team that has diversity of mindset, skills and approach"
"Hire people who are willing to stretch their skills and themselves"
"Creating the right function is an ongoing process"
"Ensure there is time for real debate and creation not just monitoring"
"Encourage planning and accountability"

Self-knowledge

✛ There was a high level of reflection and self-knowledge among the study participants, enabling them to achieve many of the key challenges of the role: be authentic and open in order to build strong, positive relationships; have the confidence to take risks and hold challenging positions; and be continually willing to learn and improve themselves.

Participants shared a pattern of taking learning from past successes and failures and adapting it to new situations for ever-increasing effectiveness. Their strong basis of self-knowledge keeps them grounded and resilient in the face of set-backs or challenges. Many described a need for maturity and patience, picking the right battles, "rolling with the punches" and maintaining control of their emotional state.

✛ Sample quotes on Self-awareness...

"I believe in my own resilience and robustness"
"When things have not worked it was when I wasn't true to myself"
"Dare to be different and take risks. You must have self belief"
"You have to be confident in your own abilities before you can be confident and effective at challenging others"
"Growth and learning has to be in my day"
"You have to be able to manage your personal state"
"Take care of yourself. Fit body, fit mind"

Establishing credibility

One of the keys to success as an HR Leader is establishing credibility and respect with all stakeholders on coming into the role. This is what later enables the HR Leader to influence the organisation's direction. The HR Leaders in our study approached this from three different angles; business person, relationship person and facilitator.

The business person focuses on demonstrating their knowledge of, and opinions about, the business to establish credibility and respect as a business equal. This can be a highly effective strategy and works particularly well in task and results oriented organisations. It is less effective in organisations that prioritise relationship, where it can come across as too hard-nosed.

The relationship person focuses on building deep relationships which can later be leveraged to gain support for initiatives and ideas. This is absolutely essential in relationship-driven organisations but can be less effective in highly task-oriented, low relationship organisations where it can be seen as a waste of time at best or political manipulation at worst.

The facilitator achieves through influencing others to champion and take ownership of his or her agenda. This can be highly effective in consensual organisations and in those where HR does not have sufficient power in the business. If used in an organisation where individual accountability is prized, the risk is that credit for results will be attributed to the champion, rather than the architect.

Each of these approaches can be useful and effective in certain contexts. The important point is not to rely on one to the exclusion of all others in all situations. The successful HR Leader judges the style and approach of the organisation, or individuals within it, and moderates their approach accordingly.

Most of the participants had a clear preference for one approach and could confirm that they had relied on this approach across multiple organisations and situations. However, they cited instances where relying on their preferred approach alone would not have produced the results they needed. They described the need to be flexible and deliberate in moving between all three in order to be effective with a range of individuals and in a variety of organisations.

Establishing credibility

+ Different leaders start in different places to gain credibility and leverage their purpose..

Facilitator/coach

Business person

Relationship builder

The route to success

+ Much of what has been described above is about the exceptional HR Leader's ways of thinking and being in their role. These are crucially important, and often missed aspects of what creates success. However it is also necessary to discover what they do to create that success. When the HR Leaders described the sequence of steps they follow to achieve success, they described a common path. They start with a clear sense of passionate purpose, a view of the potential for the business and how they can help achieve it. They create a compelling story about their vision of the possibilities and convince key stakeholders to believe in it. They pace the organisation in its readiness for change and make good judgements about how much to change and when. They are brave and take well-calculated risks. They create an innovative and competent HR function and inspire them, with the business vision, to come along for the ride.

When we fed back this pattern to participants they could both identify with it and recognise the detrimental impact of missing or under-emphasising any single step.

Measure and reinforce success

Create an innovative, competent function

Take a risk, learn from testing ideas

Understanding the organisation's readiness to act

Developing a compelling story

Clear sense of purpose

Leading HR

Making it to the top

STOP
- Being a partner to the business
- Influencing colleagues to get things done

START
- Being a leader to the business
- Choosing the style to achieve credibility
- Leading the whole HR function

CONTINUE
- Clarifying purpose
- Growing self knowledge

Implications

The level of technical HR knowledge or skill that an HR Leader has is not a strong predictor of success in the role. Far more important is the ability to establish credibility with a wide range of stakeholders, build an innovative and effective HR function and play a full and equal role as a corporate leader.

In selection, the key to finding high performing HR Leaders is to look for the underlying qualities that define great HR Leaders. Candidates who:

Articulate a clear sense of purpose to transform the business through its people

Tell a compelling and convincing story about what is possible for the business and how they can make it happen

Are ready and willing to put their business leadership above their HR expertise

Know themselves: their strengths, weaknesses, preferences and trigger points

Demonstrate that they have the leadership ability to build and inspire a competent fit-for -purpose HR function

Show evidence of flexibility in how they build credibility

For organisations with talented HR Business Partners who might be future candidates for the HR Leader role there are some clear pointers for development:

Help them learn flexible approaches to building credibility

Enable them to adopt an increasing leadership role within their business's management team

Give them a leadership role within the HR function with responsibility for constructing and developing a multi-faceted team

"It's the mindset that makes the difference."

Further information

+ The Head Heart + Brain team have deep understanding and experience helping HR leaders. If you would like to find out more about HR research get in touch at partners@hhab.co.uk or visit our web site www.headheartbrain.com

The team at Head Heart + Brain work with the rational and cognitive content-the head; with the emotions focusing on how people are successful-the heart and with the brain using the findings from neuroscience to inform their work.