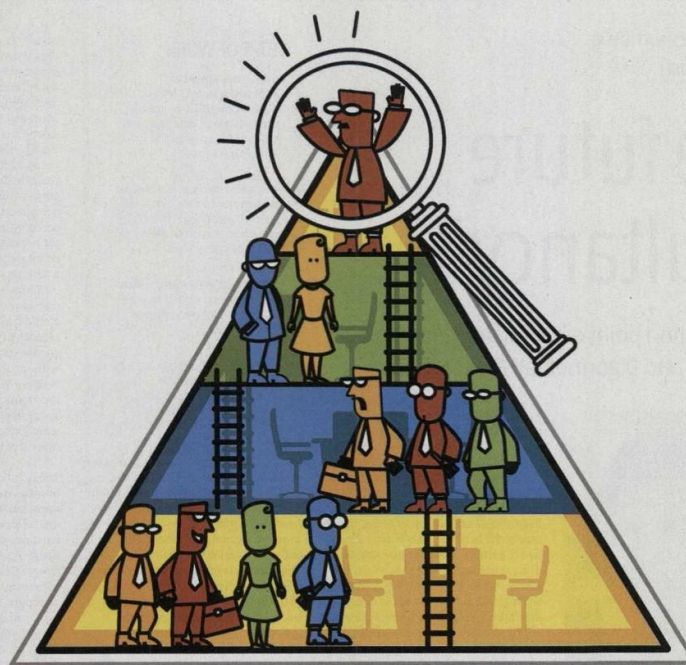


Publication: Business Standard- The Strategist

Date: May 5, 2014



GUEST COLUMN

## HR for the C-suite

HR leaders should see the economic climate as an opportunity to further demonstrate the value they can add to a business

Senior managers are often looked upon as the driving force of a company. They are considered visionaries who push the business ahead cohesively, motivate employees and create cross-functional dialogue to align goals and targets. Despite the pivotal role played by them in shaping an organisation, little attention is paid to the needs of senior leadership from an HR perspective. This conundrum arises not from the lack of recognition of such needs, but from the absence of a structure to address these requirements.

To even begin addressing these issues, it is important to understand what senior management requires from the human resources department and how HR often fails them. Unlike other roles that are primarily task-oriented in nature, senior management has more strategy-based roles that rely less on functional details and more on the top view of the way an organisation operates. In most conventional organisations, the emphasis on detail is so great that the bigger picture is lost in the bargain. Senior management spends so much time dealing with mundane paper work and organisational nitty-gritty, that strategy building gets delegated to the back burner. In such a scenario, the most important role for HR is to streamline processes and create enough leg room for management to go beyond the roles they often get stuck in. For this very purpose, it becomes important

for HR to foster an environment that helps in anticipating, filtering and accelerating issues so that top management is in the know of potential roadblocks and can focus on decision-making.

Today, given the constant pressure to perform, HR also has to become the 'ear' to senior leaders, being discreet about grievances and executing change accordingly. Jack Welch, one of the world's most respected and celebrated CEOs, rightly said that HR needs to be parent-pastor, being part pastor (hearing all sins and complaints without recrimination) and part parent (loving and nurturing, but talking straight when things go off track). Such a role is often cathartic and helps senior leaders 'unburden'.

This becomes increasingly important in today's management environment. Leaders today are often younger. Instead of rising through the ranks, they have catapulted to the top in a much shorter time span and have often worked in diverse organisations, in different geographies. Instead of growing with one organisation, many of today's leaders believe in joining an organisation to make it grow. So they need to adopt and

adapt to the culture of the organisation they decide to join and handle. Such changes in the external environment need to reflect in hiring and retention practices within companies. With younger leaders coming in, a trustworthy second opinion is what matters the most when dealing with senior leaders.

Having people who never stick their necks out or challenge leadership is lethal because it can easily lead to groupthink. Consequently, HR needs to not just hire competent resources to work with leaders but identify people who are outspoken and are able to respectfully disagree with senior leaders. This will enable better communication of popular sentiment and give a senior management a clear ground view. Given that, the company culture also becomes an important factor to consider while hiring senior management, HR often needs to ponder on questions regarding cultural fit and the personality of leaders while creating a talent pipeline.

Another factor that adds to the mix is the increased cross-functionality wherein content leaders in one department become heads of other departments. Though having in-depth functional knowledge is a pre-

requisite, in most organisations it is considered more of a 'threshold capability'. It is not that technical skills are irrelevant but more important than them are leadership capabilities. Increased cross-functional dialogue and emphasis on multi-tasking has led to multi-hatting, leading to rather complex organisation structures at the top. This leads to greater coordination in different departments internally but increases emphasis on the learning and development thrust of organisations.

It is also widely recognised that senior leadership roles have a larger time horizon due to which the challenges faced in such roles are distinctly different. Questions like what will be the company's strategic story going forward; what will be the vision or does the organisation need the successor to be a visionary; what will be the operating requirements over a three-to-five year time horizon etc. have to be addressed by organisation leaders and HR alike so that such roles develop more depth and meaning from a strategy point of view.

Though the path ahead is winding and long, it is being acknowledged that senior leadership too requires HR, often more than was earlier imagined. A lot of work still needs to be done to reach that stage where HR can proudly say to our senior leaders that 'we have your back sir'; but, I guess well begun is half done. 🐾



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