For over 20 years, I’ve had the opportunity to work in Human Resources. In that time I’ve seen many strong, effective HR professionals, and, sadly, many less effective (and some downright awful) HR professionals. I’ve seen HR pro’s who were passionate and positive about their careers and their roles and those who hated coming to work every day. I’ve seen HR pro’s who were at the right hand of leaders in terms of business decisions and those who never spoke to business leaders and yet complained about not having influence in the organization.

You’ve probably observed many of the same things. There have been countless articles and news items about the role of HR and the perception of HR—in far too many cases, not positive perceptions—and some companies have eliminated HR, renamed HR, changed out HR leaders, or dramatically changed people practices. All because what had been done in the past in HR was not viewed as being effective for today or tomorrow.

The expectations for people who practice in this space, whether the group that they work in is called Human Resources, the People Department, or the Talent Management group, or other things, are changing. To meet those expectations, the beliefs, practices, and competencies for HR professionals need to change to shift and adjust to the realities of organizations today. Going forward, HR professionals will need to have a much deeper understanding of the business, business strategies, and approaches to building the capabilities that organizations need to achieve both short term and long term business goals.

Many HR people want to make these changes but don’t know how. The intent of this white paper is to provide suggestions and a framework to begin to make the transition to becoming a more Strategic Business Partner.
For our purposes, we'll assume that you already deliver your operational HR practices well--hiring, payroll, delivering core training programs, benefits, managing employee relations matters, and so on. It is very difficult for business partners and leaders to trust HR professionals to work in the “strategy space” if they don’t deliver on these fundamental HR processes.

In this white paper, I will focus on the practices of a Strategic Business Partner. These have been developed over many years as I have worked with senior business leaders and personally lead and developed HR business partners.

I call these the 6 Practices of a Strategic Business Partner:

1. Thinking like a strategic business partner
2. Becoming a student of the business
3. Becoming a student of the People Side of business
4. Developing and proactively communicating people insights
5. Aligning people strategies to business strategies
6. Constantly modeling the role of a trusted business partner

I will now briefly review each practice; for more information, please see the Development Resources listed under “Developing Strategic Human Resources” at https://www.leadingpeoplepartners.com.

Practice #1: Thinking like a strategic business partner.

This practice describes a simple concept that is more rare than it should be for HR professionals. The idea is this: Strategic Business Partners are constantly thinking about the business, business results, business strategies, and how talent and HR practices can support the strategies of the business. This requires HR professionals to examine their thinking, and move away from thinking of their roles as police officers, therapists, or service providers.
Practice #2: Becoming a Student of the Business

After deciding to think like a Strategic Business Partner, you will need to truly become a student of the business. Not just a student of the latest HR or Talent practices. A student of the business. Strategic Business Partners make becoming a student of the business a very high priority.

Strategic Business Partners invest in becoming a student of business learning about the Six Business Disciplines, which include:

1. Business Strategy
2. Finance
3. Marketing
4. Supply Chain
5. Public and Private Ownership Models
6. Operations

Strategic Business Partners work to increase their knowledge in the Business Disciplines where there is the biggest gap between what they currently know and what the priorities of the organization are.

Strategic Business Partners also invest time in learning about their specific business and asking thoughtful business questions of leaders and colleagues.

Practice #3: Becoming a Student of the People Side of Business

In addition to becoming a student of the business, Strategic Business Partners have the opportunity to pursue a parallel set of knowledge areas and competencies to become a student of the People Side of Business. The People Side of Business for Strategic Business Partners includes three key areas:

• Having an HR specialty “home base”
• Consultative and Problem Solving Skills
• Strategic Talent Management Practices

Strategic Business Partners should stay current in these three areas, while being cautious of “best practices” and “trends” that are not a fit for their specific organization’s culture, business, and context.
Practice #4: Developing and Proactively Communicating People Insights

One of the most important things that Strategic Business Partners do is to proactively share important insights about the organization, talent, and culture of the business with senior leaders.

There are two key sources of insights about the organization, talent, and culture of your business. They are quantitative/data-based insights, and qualitative-based insights. You should have an understanding of both to be able to provide meaningful perspective to senior leaders and to your teams. I’ve found that as we as HR professionals particularly focus on data-based insights, our credibility and impact grows.

Using rapidly improving data visualization tools, and thoughtful data “stories”, Strategic Business Partners can convey important people insights to leaders and be involved in key discussions and decisions about those insights.

Practice #5: Aligning People Strategies to Business Strategies

Now that you deeply understand the business, have a strong foundation in Talent Management, and are using talent insights to drive conversations and insight about your talent, you have a strong foundation to begin working to align your people strategies to business strategies. I have found over the years that there is a repeatable approach that can be used to go through this process, which can be applied at the organization level as well as at the department level, Engaging in this practice is one of the most strategic and important things you can do in working with a business leader. Here is how it works at its simplest level:

Phase 1: Define Organization Capability Gaps

Phase 2: Determine which talent or organization effectiveness practices can most positively impact organization capability gaps.

Phase 3: Build a People Plan that addresses those talent practices and assigns responsibilities, timelines, and priorities.

Phase 4: Evaluate progress and adjust approaches as needed.
Practice #6: Constantly modeling the role of a trusted business partner.

Over the years, I’ve seen too many otherwise talented and knowledgeable HR professionals struggle with this practice. As a result, their influence and impact are too often limited and they have become frustrated with their roles. Let’s look at the four characteristics of trusted business partners:

They are CREDIBLE

They are COURAGEOUS

They carefully manage CONFIDENTIALITY

They seek COLLABORATION

Strategic Business Partners who seek to model these characteristics regularly ask for feedback from business leaders and from HR colleagues, and adjust their approach to be even more effective.

Conclusion

These 6 Practices of Strategic Business Partners take time to implement and to become a part of who you are and what you do. There will be both successes and opportunities as you apply these practices.

Don’t attempt to make these shifts alone. Engage your manager, peers, and the business leaders that you partner with and ask for their feedback.

It is worth it. I’ve seen it! As you move down this path to become a more strategic business partner, you will feel more influential and more engaged. You will feel a growing sense of worth and value to the business.

And you will enjoy your role in HR more.

Good luck!
About The Author
Todd Averett has been fascinated by the challenges associated with Leading the People Side of Business for over 20 years. He was most recently Vice President, Global Human Resources for a global, multi-billion dollar retail company with over 25,000 employees. There he held progressively responsible positions, ultimately leading the global HR teams located in the US, China, Canada, Latin America, and Australia. Todd has played key roles in acquisitions, divestitures, international expansion, organizational restructures, and cultural change initiatives.

Prior to working in retail management, Todd worked in the Learning and Development function at Brigham Young University, where he received a Master’s Degree in Organization Behavior from the Marriott School of Management. Prior to his master’s degree, he received his Bachelor’s Degree in Psychology, with an emphasis in Organizational and Personnel Psychology.

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About Leading People Partners, LLC
Leading People Partners is a consulting, training, and executive coaching firm, specializing in:

- Onboarding and Developing Leaders
- Developing Strategic Human Resources
- Accelerating Talent Management Practices
- Building Strong Internal Partnerships and Teams

We’d love to partner with you to help you and your team better lead the people side of business.

To learn more, check out our website at www.leadingpeoplepartners.com or contact us directly at todd@leadingpeoplepartners.com or 785-478-0023.