

# Tips to the top in HR

There are often questions from early HR career practitioners about what they can do proactively to reach the top of their profession. In this month's Instep, we look at some of the main ways that HR leaders manage their careers to get to the top.

Firstly, what are some of the facets of a HR career that can't be managed? Before looking at the issues that can be "managed" in a HR career to get to the top, it is worthwhile pointing out that there are some things that can't!

Like many areas of professional endeavour, to reach the top in HR can require some basic attributes such as intellectual horsepower, interpersonal and relationship management behavioural skills and overall business street smarts and common sense. It's very hard to reach the top in HR if you don't have these basic attributes combined with a good dose of plain good luck and excellent timing.

To say luck and good timing have a part to play in senior HR practitioners reaching the top of their career does sound a tad simplistic. Many who lead large functions would say that their career progression was heavily influenced by joining the right company at the right time, or meeting the right person at the right time to influence their career.

So what are the areas that can be managed to enhance a HR career?

There are some similarities in the ways that many HR leaders manage their careers. These are:

- **Mentors** – some of the most powerful learnings in a HR career can be discovered with the assistance of an independent career mentor. At a recent function held by The Next Step's early career specialist group, The Next Gen, two HR leaders, Jacky Smithwick from GE Money and Noel Pearce, the NSW AHRI president, both confirmed the power mentors have had on their careers.

The opportunity to develop HR careers with the value of an independent mentor can't be understated in the opinion of both Jacky and Noel. They both spoke passionately about the value to them of an independent mentor, agreeing that mentoring had been a significant and positive influence on their careers.

- **Networks** – hand in hand with mentors is a professional network. The power that a broad and active network can offer to leverage learnings from the market is definitely something that HR leaders embrace. Exposure to different industries and approaches can provide new ideas and insights into dealing with issues in an inexact science field such as HR.

- **Difficult assignments** – many senior HR leaders will comment that they have pushed themselves outside their comfort zone regularly and taken on difficult projects or assignments to help drive experience in their career. In other words, most HR leaders have worked hard and pushed themselves at some stage in their career to get where they are (even if they don't now!).
- **Business experience** – many HR leaders have taken on the learnings offered by taking on a business role in their careers or at the very least, taken a very definite decision to drive their commercial acumen development. This results in them being in a strong position as a senior business leader to understand what is going on in their business, their industry and in the business community.
- **Different exposures** – looking at the careers of HR leaders usually shows that they have moved focus in their careers; from line HR roles to corporate roles; from large organisations with larger HR infrastructures to separate P&L business units (or companies with smaller HR headcounts) and from operational roles to more strategy and planning roles. This type of HR "education" has shown to be beneficial for many HR leaders.
- **Communications** – as old fashioned as it sounds, there is no doubt that developing written, verbal and presentation skills that are focused on simple plain English are still essential in business and particularly HR.
- **Additional study** – irrespective of the type of study from short courses through to MBAs, continuous development is still an important element of the career management plan for many HR leaders. Having said this, while the HR function looks after the professional development of people in the business, it often overlooks its own in the area of PD.

While it's hard to generalise across the whole spectrum of HR leadership, it's fair to say that the people that take their profession seriously and work hard at managing the things that can be managed in their careers, will do well. Combine this hard work in career management with a little bit of luck and a dose of good timing, dividends will be paid and a passport to fame and glory in HR is assured.

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