

HR Directors who do they turn to?

You are at the top of your game. The Head of the Human Resources function. The go-to person who is the font of all knowledge. Whether it be a complex employment law scenario, a new business venture or a highly sensitive people issue, you are the person who has the answers – or know where to source them. You lead, inspire and are accountable for the development of your direct team and indirectly all employees within the organisation. You act as a trusted advisor and confidante to the CEO, report regularly to the board and hold the mirror up to business leaders – challenging them and keeping them honest. You role model the corporate behaviours and help to set the values and tone of the business whilst driving and developing the culture and managing risk. Are you feeling the weight yet?

So what happens when you have a bad day? Or hit a wall on an issue? Who do you turn to for advice? Who guides your career? And who is your trusted advisor?

We spoke to a number of leading HR Directors to gain their insight

Firstly and fundamentally all the HR leaders we spoke to highlighted the criticality in having business mentors. Peter Brydon HR Director for Kraft ANZ strongly believes that HR Directors should have mentors at the CEO level. “The key to HR is its relevance to the business. You need to engage and network with business professionals so that you can continually test and refresh their expectations of the HR function.” Likewise David Cardiff GMHR for Transurban emphasised the importance of bouncing ideas off others. “Listening to and learning from others is the best way to generate ideas, but you do tend to find favourites – they are people who do not judge your motives, are honest and direct and have the ability to step above or outside an issue to see the bigger picture. Every business has them. HR should know who they are and seek them out.” Anita Muller HR Director with The Just Group reinforces this: “As the ultimate generalist in the business you have to know what you don’t know and have trusted technical advisors who are linked in the way you and your business think so that you can get the right answer for the business, as quickly as possible.”

In addition, all agree that external networks are a must. David

commented that “External peers have also been invaluable. As a relatively new GM, I have worked hard to build a circle of external peers... Most of my issues have been faced by these people before and they have saved me an enormous amount of time.” Peter not only agrees on the value of external networks but insists it is a duty. “Networking with industry professionals and partnering with leading consultancies is imperative to gaining up-to-date and multifaceted information on the industry. Business leaders rely on our interpretation of this information – it is therefore essential that we effectively engage with, and absorb knowledge from, our industry peers.”

Anita cannot over-emphasise the value of mentors. Internally she finds inspiration from the amazing people she works with and externally she has a core group she has developed throughout her career. They are her lifeline, sanity check and trusted advisors. “Sometimes those right brain thoughts need to be aired in very safe environments. Getting the conversations out there can often just be enough.”

So what happens on those occasions when as a senior HR leader you do not know the answer asked of you? As David insightfully put it: “Rarely are you asked a question where someone is looking for an expert answer. More often they are seeking to explore concepts and ‘what if’ scenarios. Where you can add value is exploring the underlying question – are they asking the right set of questions? This is where your advisory skills come into play. Once you’ve got the right questions, answers can be found.” Peter further supported this thinking: “There is no functional area that stumps you as there is always an answer to be found. It is more about how to address the strategic aspects of the business with the executive team. My role is about being an ambassador for the brand of the organisation.”

As advisors to others in relation to career management, we asked them how they managed their own careers and if at times they felt overlooked with regards to development. “HR forgotten – you’ve got to be kidding. In my view CEOs expect their HR people to know their discipline and to be commercial in their thinking. It’s 2008 and CEOs are as interested in HR leaders as they are any other type of leader,” says David. He goes on to say, “and along with all other professions HR Directors should practise what they preach and have a career development plan.” Whilst Anita doesn’t attest to having followed a formal career plan she has always sought out companies where she can deliver her best work. “I believe that if you work in a business and with leaders with whom there is a values match and who inspire you, you will deliver at your top level. I have been lucky in finding a number of companies that fit the mould and in having the courage to know and move when that wasn’t the case.”

The value of executive coaches was also highlighted although it was suggested that there could be more made available specifically for HR leaders. An opportunity perhaps?

It appears that it is anything but lonely at the top. There are many sources of advice and counsel so long as you are prepared to seek them out. The effectiveness of course will always lie in the interpretation and application.

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