5 Ways to Drive Performance in Your Workplace
Experts say that strategic thinking will soon be HR’s top contribution

Analytics & big data analysis will be critical skills for HR leaders

HR devotes less than 15% of its time to being a strategic business partner.

Table of Contents

Intro: The Case for Change in HR..............................................................3
1. Build a Better Workplace Through Better Listening.................4
2. Keep Your Best Employees Happy.....................................................6
3. Tackle Difficult Situations.................................................................11
4. Drive Innovation..................................................................................14
5. Get Employees to Talk Before They Decide to Walk...........16
Summary: The Bottom Line Impact of HR.......................................19
The Case for Change in HR

The old song says:

Everybody wants to go to Heaven
But nobody wants to die

In HR we all want our work to build a better workforce; as an industry, why are we so reluctant to change? To truly become the strategic partners our businesses need, we need to get better at embracing change. Thankfully not all changes need to be painful.

The needs of businesses have changed drastically over the last few decades, and the role of HR is as critical now as it’s ever been. In this whitepaper you’ll find 5 ways to increase performance in your workforce and make HR a strategic weapon for your company.
Think of times you’ve experienced the following scenarios:

You’re talking with another person, sharing your ideas or point of view. They nod their head as you speak, indicating they are tracking you. However, when they respond, it’s clear they had no idea what you were talking about.

When people don’t listen, they don’t just communicate how unimportant the other person is to them. They also miss out on important information that could help deepen their relationships and enrich their lives.

Are YOU really listening?

Try it. Notice if you are truly listening, rather than,

1. Looking attentive while thinking of other things.

- David Lee
2. Plotting your response.

3. Feeling a mounting urge to share something that’s on your mind, and waiting impatiently for them to finish so you can talk.

Also, notice how rarely you experience someone truly listening to you—how rare it is for someone to be 100 percent focused on you and trying wholeheartedly to understand what you are saying.

Notice how wonderful it feels when someone actually does give you their undivided attention.

More to notice

Notice how wonderful it feels when the other person asks you meaningful questions, questions that could only be asked by someone listening intently.

Notice how wonderful it feels when the other person doesn’t try to interrupt you, either because they want to talk or look at their smart phone. Instead, they let you take the time you need to explore and share what’s on your mind.

Also notice how different it feels when the other person allows the spotlight to stay on you as you share, rather than responding “Yeah, I know what you mean…” and then shares their own experiences without ever returning to what you had been sharing.

As you notice these things, you will also notice that listening is a rare and special gift. How about giving the gift of listening more often and noticing how others respond?
Your best employees are the people who drive your organization forward—they are more creative, more productive, and bring more value to your organization.

So, keeping them happy must be a priority, because these are the employees that are typically not replaceable.

Here are 10 tips on how you can do that:

1. **Know what motivates them**

Your best employees are likely intrinsically motivated. That means they are motivated by their work and their outcomes, and not as much by external rewards like money or extra days off.

Sure, those perks are nice, but if you really want to get them excited, give them a great project to work on that is in line with their professional interests and the freedom to make it better than you ever thought it could be.
2. Remove the obstacles

The first job of any great boss is to remove obstacles, but this becomes especially important with your best employees. Think specifically about any political battles and power struggles they may encounter in achieving their goal. Take them out of the equation entirely to keep your best employees’ eyes focused on the prize rather than the pain points.

3. Treat them unequally

Yes, you read that correctly. Your best employees are not equal to the rest of your staff, and treating them as such does nothing to help your organization.

When you treat them equally, you are literally wasting organizational resources. Think of it as an investment – when you put more resources into your best employee, you’re going to get far more of a return.

4. Involve them

Your best employees understand that there is a bigger picture involved and want to see how their work contributes to it. So, don’t withhold information.

Communicate with them. Involve them in the process. Be transparent. It will be a big motivator and likely spurn all sorts of additional ideas that might contribute to the bottom line.
5. Be flexible

Being flexible can have a number of different interpretations. Here are just a few:

- Don’t force them to always come to the office. Let them work remotely.
- Don’t force them onto a 9-5 schedule. Let them come in late and work late…or come in early and leave early.
- Don’t force them into a stuffy business dress code when it has no impact on their success. A pair of jeans never hurt anyone.
- Don’t force them to follow dumb rules and policies. You know which ones we’re talking about here.
- Don’t get in the way of their side projects. Encourage consulting and freelance as long as it doesn’t get in the way of their work. They likely want to explore a variety of interests and outside work allows them to do that.

As long as they are being productive and meeting their goals, let them do their thing. You will get more out of them when they are happy, comfortable, and not being bogged down by red tape.

6. Give them critical feedback

Your best employees are constantly questioning their own work and looking for ways to make it better. So, telling them their work is great all the time isn’t particularly helpful.

When you take the time to give them thoughtful, critical feedback about their work, you are actually showing them that you value them, their effort, and that you want to develop them and help them become better.
7. Don’t waste their time

Forcing your best employees to leave their work and go sit in a meeting to talk about things that aren’t relevant forces them out of their flow and cuts into their overall productivity.

Meetings themselves are not the problem. Bad, unorganized, unproductive meetings are the problem.

8. Pay attention to culture

Don’t underestimate the role the social aspect plays in keeping your best employees happy. Enhance their working environment by giving them opportunities to work and engage with people that like them and rally as a team.

Not only will they enjoy coming to work more, but the group will collectively push each other to the next level.

9. Give them innovation time

Your best employees need time to experiment and try new things to keep them interested and motivated. Build it into their schedule.

Let them tinker with things that are interesting to them as long as they are meeting their other goals. Denying them can be very de-motivating and if the project doesn’t prove fruitful, they’ll likely abandon it anyway. This may seem to be counter-productive but in they’ll still be more productive than your average employees and much more fulfilled in their work.
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I’ve found over the years that when I do the hard work prior to a difficult conversation (to get into a state where I’m truly willing to hear the other person’s point of view rather than make them wrong or chastise them), miracles happen.

**Bringing out the best self in others**

A truism that Dr. Bonnie Vestal operates on that has proved really helpful to me is, “Don’t frighten people, because when people act frightening, it’s because they are frightened.”

When people feel threatened, their reptilian brain gets triggered. This very primitive region of the brain is responsible for activating survival programs, such as “the best defense is a good offense,” “kill or be killed,” “if you’re helpless, you will soon be dead,” and “if you’re attacked, attack back.”

Thus, if we want to bring out the other’s best self, their higher self, we need to come to the conversation in a non-threatening emotional and mental state. This can take a lot of work if we’re really upset and have convinced ourselves how bad and wrong the other person is.
“Not frightening people—which in many ways means “not frightening their reptilian brain”—also means doing the work to choose words and use a voice tone that communicates, “I’m safe to talk to. You can be safe having this conversation.”

**Bringing out your best self**

Here are a few questions you can ask yourself prior to dealing with someone you find difficult or having a difficult conversation:

- “How would someone you respect for their wisdom, courage, emotional intelligence, and compassion deal with this?”

- What response (or action) on my part is for the greater good?”

- “Would the way I am thinking of bringing up this issue make the other person feel safe or threatened?”

- “The way I’m thinking of dealing with this, would I be proud if some person I you have huge respect for were there watching me?”

- “Who might I talk through my perspective and the approach I’m considering, so I can get a third-party perspective?”

**This I can promise**

If you do the work to bring the best you into conversations, and by doing so, bring out the best self in others, you will not only experience a whole lot less stress in relationships, you will get far better results from others, and, perhaps most importantly, you will truly make a positive difference wherever you go.
The best way to harness a company’s “collective genius” is with leaders that operate as shepherds guiding a flock. This idea of leading from behind was coined by Harvard Business School professor Linda Hill.

Essentially, once a leader has created the vision and determined the direction for their team, guidance and support are their best contributions for driving growth and encouraging employees to improve upon the existing way of doing business.

A main point to Hill’s theory is that innovation in today’s business world is increasingly coming from collaborative teams, rather than the sole champion innovator. Great ideas can come from anywhere in a company, and fostering an environment in which anyone can innovate is an important part of a high performance culture.

Leverage unique experience

On the other side of the spectrum from leading from behind, a leader thinks up the idea, designs the execution plan, and then directs their team to execute by staying in their narrow lane. Employees don’t make many decisions and follow their leader toward the stated goal.
In this scenario, employees aren’t permitted to leverage their unique experience and personal perspectives to the advantage of the company. These can be valuable resources as you look to drive growth.

**Collections of small innovations**

The best ideas are often collections of small innovations.

Think of a big idea like the iPod. The big idea is a handheld music player, but it is made possible through a number of smaller innovations such as the scroll wheel and single action button, plus the operating system, not to mention the electronic hardware itself. Coming up with the best product depended on teams of individuals thinking up original ideas for even the smallest details.

Creating an environment like that which fosters the type of employees that voice their opinions and collaborate to create original solutions requires leaders that empower.

The truth is that the strongest ideas are those that stand the test of debate. Ideas that are challenged and enhanced by a team of individuals have a better chance of success than new ideas created by from an outspoken leader and delivered as an edict.
It’s human behavior to want to move away from things that are not working or are starting to feel tough, or just too hard, because sometimes walking away seems like the easiest choice. It’s true in life in general, and particularly true in the job market.

**Knowing an employee is looking BEFORE they quit**

Starting fresh often feels like an attractive proposition if you can’t see a way forward in your current organization, if it feels like your career has stalled, or promises made have not been met.

Quite often, the last person to hear about someone’s intention to explore other options is their manager.

We all know the way it normally plays out—dissatisfaction leads to the outpouring of frustration to friends and family, then the decision to visit a recruitment agent, tidying up your LinkedIn profile, then the secret interviews.
As a manager it’s often near to impossible at this point to negotiate a positive way forward at work. If someone has gone to such lengths to explore other options, they probably have already emotionally and mentally “checked out” and readied themselves to move on.

In a recent Harvard Business Review (HBR) article on this subject, Encourage Your Employees to Talk About Other Job Offers, the authors put forward a refreshing perspective on the topic. In particular, they get into concept of “Right of First Conversation,” coined from the more popular clause found in many employment agreements, the “Right of First Refusal.”

### Taking the Right of First Conversation approach

Essentially the Right of First Conversation is a mutual agreement that if an employee is thinking about seriously exploring other career options, they commit to talking with their current manager first so that the organization has the chance to define a more appealing role.

It’s not about playing companies and roles off against each other, or creating tension, but an upfront and honest conversation and opportunity to see if and how the current role and career path can be moulded and shaped to better suit. Both parties are committing to seeing if there is a chance to find a fit, but they equally understand that if there isn’t, the relationship can end amicably.

The HBR article reminds us that this new way of working requires a high level of trust. Managers need to be able to say, “We don’t fire people here for talking honestly about their career goals,” and truly mean it.
It’s then about looking for a solution to suit all parties, not about egos, power games, counter offers and sudden resignations. It’s about honest and frank conversations about career satisfaction and role shaping. Constructive solutions or amicable partings, both lead to a better way forward for both parties.

I’ll be honest: This is a pretty large shift from how the traditional employment uncoupling takes place, and it requires a high level of skill and maturity on both parts. However it also requires something else: A very clear understanding of what the employee does want from their role and career path.

**Getting clarity on what is important**

Often people are unhappy or frustrated and choose to leave, but they can’t necessarily articulate clearly and with conviction what they really do want. They just feel a need to move away from something that is not working.

Being able to get clarity on the things that are important to the employee, and how their current role needs to shift to meet these needs, gives managers something to work with. Then, managers have the ability to “job shape” to better fit the worker, and allows them to talk about projects or temporary assignments that might work.

In other words, a feeling of employee dissatisfaction needs to be translated into a tangible list of what needs to change, and what actions need to be taken. What talents are not being used? What values are not being met? What career goals are feeling stifled?
Lately, Human Resources has become a very hot topic—for reasons both good and bad.

**The good:** There is sufficient research to show that executive leadership wants and needs a business partner that adds value to the organization and the bottom line.

**The bad:** for the most part, HR is simply not delivering.

**Still asking the same questions about HR**

This tension is not new. Back in 1997, Harvard professor Michael Beer shared his thoughts about HR in *The Transformation of the Human Resource Function*. His premise then was that HR must shift from administrative work to strategic partnership. A year later, Dave Ulrich asked in the Harvard Business Review, “Should we do away with HR?”
Folks, that was over 15 years ago and we are still asking the same question.

As a 30-year HR veteran, I find it exciting that business thought leaders—including Ram Charan, who wrote about fixing HR earlier this year in HBR (in It’s Time to Split HR)—are taking interest in our profession. That means that there is a compelling need for our work. But the answer is not changing HR’s organizational structure or reporting relationship.

Some people advocate embedding HR in the business lines. Why would we turn such a critical role over to operational leaders who are neither trained to nor held accountable for effectively or systemically sourcing, hiring, engaging, measuring, and developing talent? Why would we allow the 30,000-foot view of the people part of the business to happen at the whims of operational leaders who have so many competing priorities?

Our global economy demands a holistic look at people, at talent, so that we can cultivate cultures of high performance. HR can do this. There are two things preventing it.

1. HR must add value

First, executive leadership has to demand, as with any leadership role in the organization, that their HR leader adds value.

Study after study shows executive leaders are disappointed in HR. My question is this: Why would a CEO allow an HR leader to be less than effective? What would happen if CEOs asked HR leaders this crucial question: “How well is our workforce performing, and how do we improve performance?”
Isn’t that the crux of the issue? You can look at the components—talent acquisition, pay and benefits, learning and development—but each of those components must be connected in order to answer the question, “How well is our workforce performing?”

2. HR must get its act together

Second, HR doesn’t have its act together. It doesn’t ask good business questions, and it tells business leaders what they must do, which leads to business leaders doing work because they have to, not because they see the value.

All of the sub-disciplines of HR—recruiting, employee relations, performance management, compensation and benefits, and learning & development—have to work together to figure out what customers (the employees and leaders of the organization) need, educate them on risk, and engage them in the right solutions.

HR cannot afford to think in silos, offering “products and services” that simply add work to the already overburdened front-line manager.

Being strategic in HR means bringing together “all things people” in such a way that we can answer the question, “How are our people performing, and what impact does that have on the bottom line?”

Until both HR and executive leadership jointly ask that simple question and begin the all-important dialogue to discover the answer, HR will be a disappointing overhead department.
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