

THE 'BOARD-CAPABLE' HR LEADER – WHAT TO LOOK FOR

Creelman Lambert's report *The Board and HR* highlighted that many HR leaders now work closely with governing boards – which some in HR have found to be quite challenging. There are quite specific skills and capabilities needed to be effective at this level.

Much of the debate about being a respected HR leader has hitherto focused on 'cutting it' within the top executive team – bearing in mind that in some organisations HR leaders have not made it this far. (For example, in certain major banks – ironically, given that they have particularly problematic people risks.)

Functional head attributes

Certainly, to be credible to board members, an HR leader must have the attributes that any functional head should possess as part of the executive team. These include

- **being a business person first and foremost** – proficiency in operational and financial management, and in business in general, preferably having done a line management job at some stage
- **'knowing your stuff'** – having real depth of experience across the HR spectrum, and in particular disciplines that facilitate strategic decision-making, such as organisational design and development; management of change; performance and reward; culture, engagement and employer branding etc
- **the ability to deliver** – shaping a function that is a trusted partner in managing the organisation at all levels, and ideally can delight its customers.

The best HR functions also work closely with colleagues across the organisation to facilitate their performance and capability – from the way their structures are designed to the way they develop talent and skills and achieve outstanding results. This starts with the HR leader interacting with his/her peers – working on top team effectiveness collectively and individually.

This requires highly effective relationship management skills as well as the ability to command professional respect. Top HR leaders talk about having to be the 'interlocutor' at times between say, the CEO and other team members, and needing to be adept at 'holding up the mirror' in order to guide leadership behaviour.

Additional attributes to be 'board-capable'

Yet to be a trusted partner at board level, the HR leader requires characteristics above and beyond what is needed as a member of the executive team. These are some of the characteristics needed.

- **Even higher relationship management skills** – able to be a trusted guide to strong personalities who, as non-executive directors, work with the company only at intervals and for restricted periods.
- **Upward coaching ability** – facilitating the relationship between chairman and CEO, and guiding chairmen on board management and development.
- **Expert interpreter of governance** – both current and future requirements, which demand that chairmen and boards behave in different ways and adopt sound people management principles
- **Risk manager** – providing HR insights, not just data, that aid boards both to understand complex organisations and environments and to form good decisions, i.e. take good risks, and avoid poor ones
- **Skilled educator** – adept at helping boards to know enough about HR, OD and psychology to ask the right questions, achieve penetrating oversight of people governance and risk, and take wise decisions about issues such as reward and succession.
- **Plain speaker** – advice should be practical and easy to understand, avoiding HR jargon

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- **Evidence-based** – the ability to win arguments and resolve difficult dilemmas, and deal with any scepticism, with the confidence of possessing facts, figures and insights that make the business case
- **Highly principled** – with the courage and gravitas to guide the board and executive leadership to ‘do right’ because it is good business.

An HR leader with these qualities will also be a great candidate for non-executive directorships. *The Board and HR* points out that many boards still suffer from a lack of diversity in skills and knowledge, and in particular high-level HR skills, ironically at a time when these are arguably needed more than ever.

We would also argue that boards themselves are deficient if they do not ensure they have a ‘board-capable’ HR leader in place. HR plays too important a role in good governance, and human capital plays too important a role in value creation, for boards to get by with anything less than a full

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