

## Speak the Language!

By Jill B. Smart

You might be asking, “Well, what language is that?” Business language, of course! Every human resources professional needs to be first and foremost a business professional. Yes, even before being a human resources professional. You might have two reactions to that statement:

- **First reaction:** “Of course I need to look at my HR role from the perspective of a business person.” This might even seem very obvious. But I do not believe all of us in HR live up to that standard.
- **Second reaction:** “Okay, literally taken, are you saying that as an HR professional I need to ‘grow up in the business’—meaning work outside of HR in some other part of the business—and then move over to HR as my second profession?” No, that is not what I mean.

I believe that no matter what your background is, whether you grew up in HR or grew up “in the business” and moved to HR, you need to do your HR job from the perspective of a business person. That is always first and foremost. But HR professionals don’t do that often enough. *All* HR professionals need to be business people, not just senior HR leaders.

So how do you become a business person first and foremost? Some of the ideas shared below may seem obvious, but don’t walk past them so fast. Sometimes we just don’t make enough time to build our skills or the skills of our teams—but HR professionals, of all people, need to “walk the talk.”

### Form strategic relationships

No matter what your role is in HR, you need to understand your organization’s overall business as well as the specific part of the business you personally support. You need to thoroughly understand the business strategy and be able to translate that into a talent strategy. Those in an HR “business partner” role should also be key members of the team that develops and evolves the business strategy. Every HR person needs to understand how their business makes money, what causes it to potentially lose money, how the organization innovates and invests in the future, and how it understands, anticipates, and meets client demand.

Business strategy and business results need to be kept in mind with everything you do. The key is to have relationships with people at all levels of the business—spending time with them, observing how they do their jobs, and asking them questions about strategies, processes, customers, and employees. And always have your “safe” contacts. It might be someone in finance you can call and ask anything—even questions that you should already know the answers to.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *HR cannot be a function performed solely from behind a desk. You need to be out in the field with business leaders and employees, at least periodically, to really understand the business.*

### **Pursue training**

Many of us work in organizations where we have a number of internal and external training courses for employees—yet HR professionals might not be required to take them. Look at all the training courses available in your organization that will help the individuals on your HR team be better business professionals, and create a mandatory HR business acumen curriculum. This curriculum can include courses from finance, marketing, legal, or other parts of your business.

Additionally, make sure your HR professionals understand the specific part of the business they support. Include required electives that are specific to the industry and segments within that industry that they support, as well as the functional or technology segments they support. HR professionals do not have to become experts in these areas, but they do need to understand the functions, marketplace, competitive landscape, and regulatory environment of the business they support.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *Using what you have available, create a business acumen curriculum for your HR people—and actually have them take the courses!*

### **Rotate jobs**

We don't move enough high-performing employees from outside of HR into HR; we don't move enough high-performing HR professionals into roles outside of HR; and we don't move HR professionals to different jobs within HR nearly enough. Movement between functions, industries, clients, and geographies builds skills, perspectives, maturity, and engagement. But it can be painful. How can you replace a compensation expert that you move to finance for a year, or a recruiting expert you make a business partner for a year? It may be challenging, but when that recruiter comes back to recruiting after spending a year performing a different role, he or she will have a better understanding of the business and be a much better recruiter as a result.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *Invest in job rotation for HR professionals early and often.*

### **Find a mentor**

Mentoring in its best form is not a formal program but the result of a connection made through some source, whether formal or informal. Your mentor needs to be someone you can be vulnerable with but also someone you trust and admire as a great business person and leader. We all need many kinds of mentors throughout our careers. But it is particularly important to

seek out a “business mentor” who understands your business more deeply and uniquely than you do. Don’t be afraid to be the underdog. Connecting with someone who has worked in the business you are supporting is a good place to start.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *A mentor is someone to whom you can show your gaps and insecurities but also reveal your beliefs and aspirations. Ultimately, a mentor can help you become a better business person.*

### **Read and listen**

HR professionals should read *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Post*, and their local newspapers every day. You should also listen to business news stations on the radio and on TV and be active in social media around your industry, your competitors, and your business landscape. In other words, you should be reading, listening to, and participating in what your business partners read, listen to, and participate in, whether it is general business information or something specific to the industry or geography you support.

You should also be reading HR magazines and periodicals such as *Human Resources Executive* magazine and *Workforce Magazine*. Remember, the HR function is a business in and of itself. We need to know what the best practices are, what the trends are, what others are doing, and what is being taught in academic institutions in our field. There are many good services that will summarize what’s new and send links to key articles based on keywords. It is worth paying for these services for your HR team.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *Spend the money to help your HR team stay current with the latest information from multiple sources, and make time to stay current yourself.*

### **Learn and share knowledge**

There are many outside learning, training, and certification opportunities that you may feel you don’t have the time to take advantage of—but they are often worth the investment. The University of Illinois, the University of Michigan, Cornell University, the University of Southern California, the University of South Carolina, and others universities offer both HR degree programs and HR executive programs. The National Academy of Human Resources (NAHR), the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM), the HR Policy Association (HRPA), the HR Certification Institute (HRCI), and many local and regional organizations also provide HR training, much of which can be done virtually and on your own time.

Additionally, there are many types of HR-related organizations where HR executives can speak, network, and share best practices while also learning from the knowledge capital shared by others. Many of us in HR leadership roles have a lot to share that is not proprietary or confidential and can help our overall profession. You should not underestimate the impact that one seasoned HR professional can have on you, nor the impact that you can have on your

fellow HR professionals.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *Get out there and listen and talk to others in the profession—and share your point of view!*

### **Stay updated on your business**

If you work for a publicly traded company, there is no better update on your business than your quarterly earnings call and earnings news release. Mandate that your HR team members listen to the call (preferably together in groups where they can have a dialogue about it), read the quarterly and annually filed SEC and other legally required documents, and consult someone in finance who can explain what impact HR had on the results and how HR can better help the organization realize its potential and achieve its forecasts.

**BOTTOM LINE:** *Require your HR professionals to engage in your organization's business communications, which will better inform them about the business and help them improve the organization's performance in the future.*

The *overall* bottom line is that we are in HR to help our organizations solve business problems, take advantage of business opportunities, and be catalysts for change. Talent is the best way to do that—which is why we need to know our businesses and our industries inside and out. We are “at the table”—so we had better have a point of view to contribute.

One last thought: “Speaking the language” of business doesn’t mean you need to be 100 percent fluent. Most people who know a second language can understand and get by but may not be perfectly conversant. The same is true in HR and business. To be effective, HR professionals do not have to be qualified to be CFOs or COOs. But they do have to understand finance and operations. As one of my mentors once told me, each and every day you need to be a student of business—so get studying!