



# 10 tactics every HR Business Partner should know

**Andrew MacLennan** and **Graham Lee** have collaborated to help you discover the secrets to successfully challenging customers. Here they provide 10 key tactics to moving from mindless fire fighting to adding real value to your business.

**We** have all been there. An executive – very often one who will strongly influence your bonus, if not whole career – looks you in the eye and explains very clearly what he or she wants from HR. The executive has a reputation for ruthless decisions, which sometimes involve unpleasant surprises for uncooperative colleagues.

If the executive is a comprehensively appraised genius with a fabulous grasp of HR, such requests are fine. However, such executives are very rare indeed. Most lack full information, have no HR experience and apply their genius to other matters. Add to this some short-term agendas and a bit of organisational politics and you have a serious problem. Even executives with the finest of intentions are prone to ask for the wrong things – simply because they are reacting to superficial problems rather than underlying causes.

Although HR typically executes its role very professionally, doing the wrong thing is a waste of time and money, fails to correct whatever is constraining performance, and often introduces new problems to the misunderstood situation.

As soon as such a request is made, it becomes difficult to see that it's the wrong response. The executive says, "I want you to recruit 150 sales advisors", when the real problem lies in the capacity management system, about which you know very little. The executive says, "We need to change the culture" when the actual problem is the performance metrics, but nobody has noticed their flaws yet. As soon as the problem is framed one way, backing up a bit and figuring out what's really going on is tricky. And then there's that ruthless executive to worry about.

Skilled Business Partners know how to play the long game, steadily curbing

customers' knee-jerk reactions, by forming good relationships and gently challenging the assumptions underlying requests for assistance. So, what are the secrets to successfully challenging customers, and moving from mindless fire fighting to adding real value? Well, every situation is unique and timing is everything, but here are ten of the best tactics.

### 1 Get close (but not cosy)

The need to develop a good rapport is pretty obvious – all the strategic skills in the world won't overcome a poor relationship. But how often have you seen HR functions carefully profile the executives and senior managers for whom they need to appoint Business Partners? Selection should include a finely tuned dating game, but often is allowed to boil down to whether the customer likes the proposed Business Partner.

And there's an important subtlety. Excessive customer intimacy can be the enemy of good challenge. HR Directors need to be alert to the possibility of their Business Partners 'going native'. If a Business Partner's loyalty is split 50:50 between the function and the customer, that's probably healthy.

### 2 Really understand the business

This is so easy to say and so often said. But those in HR who really know their businesses still stand out like sore thumbs.

Do you know the business's strategic objectives and the rationale behind them? Can you explicitly connect them to day-to-day activities and key initiatives? If not, how do you know what HR should be supporting?

Are you up-to-date with what the competition's doing and what next year's marketing strategy is looking like? You ought to be, as there will be knock-on implications for recruitment, training and reward. Asking questions about issues like these demonstrates business acumen rather than ignorance.

Really getting under the skin of a business is hard work and takes time. If you aren't prepared to be systematic about it, you'll forever be constrained in terms of the value you add, no matter how fine your HR pedigree.

### 3 Talk financials

Senior businesspeople usually like numbers, especially ones with pound signs in front. Being driven by results, hard financial numbers have meaning for them. So don't just talk about the terrible 34.7% staff turnover rate – talk about the horrendous expenditure and forgone revenue caused by that turnover, on top of the wasted management time and impact on customer service.

Equally, don't shy away from complex cost-benefit models. They are never perfect analyses or predictions, but modelling how HR issues affect business performance aids understanding the relationship between the two – what could improved staff turnover actually do to profits? Don't worry about making assumptions to underpin such models. Provide a range of scenarios or better still, build the models so that customers can fill in the assumptions for themselves. Then they'll own the results.

### 4 Proactively inform

HR is always asked to do things at the last minute. If your organisation is growing or changing fast, it is a virtual guarantee that sometime in the next year you will be asked to recruit a mass of new staff somewhere or other. So get ahead of the game. Make sure you keep the business up-to-date with the state of the labour market. How easy is it to recruit in key areas? What would you have to pay to attract new staff? How long would it take to recruit them? How much would new hire quality suffer if you rush it? Or how much more would you have to spend to get good people fast? How long could you expect new staff to stay? What induction training would they need? The more you can help the business understand the dynamics of the markets you deal in – before they make requests of you – the easier it is to handle expectations about what HR can deliver.

### 5 Align information to strategy

HR functions are very good at generating large amounts of management information. And executives are very good at taking about 30 seconds to flick through it and check the couple of things affecting their bonuses. The problem is usually that these executives cannot see

a clear link between what HR measures and business performance. For example, absence is reported, but not the associated cost and revenue implications. Make this link explicit, and you gain the interest of customers and scope to challenge interpretations of the data, constructively.

In addition, HR often reports far too much. Reporting that absence increased from 8.5% in September to 8.7% in October is tantamount to mentioning that Jean in Accounts had to go home at lunchtime last Thursday because her cold got worse. It has no decision implications whatsoever. Agree with the business some sensible parameters and use exception reporting. Focus the limited time and very limited attention of management on what matters. There's nothing to stop you holding the detailed data back, ready for answering queries.



### 6 Contribute to non-HR issues

One of the greatest constraints for HR is self-made – lack of confidence. Act timidly like you have little to add beyond your immediate field of expertise, and you ensure that you will be treated as a peripheral member of the team. Grit your teeth and step up. Don't be afraid to get stuck in on issues that don't appear to relate to HR. Apart from anything else, in the same way that many problems seen as HR issues have causes elsewhere, the opposite is often true. Spotting these is another opportunity to add value.

### 7 Go soft

Remember that influencing skills course you went on in 1989? Now you're regularly sitting opposite that ruthless executive, those skills are of real use.

It's amazing how much you can challenge senior people if you word the challenges in the right way.

Questions work better than statements. Why say, "I think this approach is too risky!" when "What risks do you think we should consider with this particular approach?" raises the same issues in a non-confrontational and facilitative manner?

And prefacing the riskier questions with such choice phrases as "This may be a stupid question but..." permits you to ask virtually whatever you want.

Everybody has his or her own bag of tricks. Now is the time to brush up on using them. And don't forget to think through what works with the individuals you deal with. Happily, those with the biggest egos are usually the easiest to predict.

### 8 Prioritise

Many HR functions build plans on the back of annual business plans. This strategic top-down approach is valid, but hundreds of ad hoc issues will always emerge throughout the year. Many of these are in fact predictable – take a look at all the things you've done over the last five years and you're sure to see a pattern.

What is important, if HR is to add real value, is to focus on a limited number of priorities. Either, plans should be built leaving considerable room for ad hoc activity, or they must be changed as decisions are made to undertake new activities.

Use a clear framework to allow your business to make explicit decisions about what matters most. Issues to consider include value/ROI, payback periods, implementation difficulty, risk levels, legal compliance, logical sequencing and cash flows. If necessary, ensure that strategic matters are discussed separately from operational issues, to avoid getting bogged down in unimportant detail.

### 9 Realign evaluation

If you want customers to think your challenge is a valuable contribution, make sure it's a component of their assessment of you. When your HR line manager discusses your appraisal with

your business customer, will your ability to challenge be discussed? Does your HR customer survey include questions about your ability to constructively challenge demands and diagnose underlying causes of problems?

Formalising challenge as part of HR's standard operating procedures makes you, look more like a fine example than a cheeky upstart or uncooperative cynic.

### 10 Link HR activity & strategic objectives

HR can leapfrog other support functions, in terms of strategic alignment, by explicitly linking its activities and projects to agreed strategic objectives.

When HR leads the identification of activities and projects, it should be the exemplar, setting the standard for explicit strategic alignment. This embeds an accepted methodology for tackling this critical challenge. Future business demands can be tested using this rigorous framework – HR can thus shine strategic light into the shadows of reactive, “short-termist” and often politically motivated business requests.

As soon as this linkage is articulated, all kinds of questions can legitimately be asked. Does the rationale stack up? What might throw a spanner in the works? How will we know if the business objectives are being impacted by the proposed activity?

These are critical questions and it's vital to have a framework that allows them to be asked. Conversations about tackling poorly defined problems with frenetic HR activity and no mention of strategic objectives are potentially worthless. In Lenin's words, “Theory without practice is pointless, practice without theory is mindless.”

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**How good are you at challenging customers to think strategically? Take the test...**

**1. The Marketing Director sends an e-mail asking you to arrange a training course on motivating staff, for all his managers. What's the most important question that comes to mind?**

- (a) Do all the managers really need this training?
- (b) What has triggered his request?
- (c) Does he want me to do training needs analysis first?
- (d) Which supplier should we use to deliver this?

**2. The Sales Director says she wants to introduce £500 'Golden Hellos' for new sales advisors, to speed up recruitment. What's the most important question that comes to mind?**

- (a) Whose budget will this come from?
- (b) Will 'Golden Hellos' attract the right kind of people?
- (c) Can we not offer more than £500?
- (d) Why is there now an anticipated gap between projected capacity and demand?

**3. The Chief Executive tells you he wants to launch a world-class executive leadership development programme, delivered by a top business school. What's the most important question that comes to mind?**

- (a) Will using a single business school give us access to the range of experts we need and value for money?
- (b) How quickly does this need to be up and running?
- (c) Should high-potential senior managers also be on the programme?
- (d) Should we develop all our executives in the same way?

**4. The new Finance Director wants to launch a culture change programme, because the one she initiated in her last organisation worked really well. What's the most important question that comes to mind?**

- (a) What did HR do to help?
- (b) Why does she want to change the culture here?
- (c) What were the objectives, context and key elements of the programme, and how did she know it 'worked'?
- (d) How long did it take and how much did it cost?

**5. The IT Director wants to increase the proportion of variable pay for some of his staff, to motivate higher performance. What's the most important question that comes to mind?**

- (a) What industrial relations issues might emerge if this goes ahead?
- (b) How is the current performance-related-pay system inadequate?
- (c) Is pay the right lever to use for motivation of the staff?
- (d) How does he assess performance and what objectives does he think might not be achieved?

**How did you do?**

**Question 1:** a=2, b=4, c=3, d=1 **Question 2:** a=1, b=3, c=2, d=4 **Question 3:** a=3, b=1, c=2, d=4 **Question 4:** a=1, b=4, c=3, d=2 **Question 5:** a=1, b=2, c=3, d=4

**1-8:** You are a supreme tactician, but are not spotting the strategic issues and are almost certainly limiting the value you add by failing to challenge customers appropriately.

**9-12:** You have a strong preference for getting on with the task at hand, but cannot be confident you are working on the right task. Developing your strategic thinking skills and learning to challenge constructively will pay dividends.

**13-16:** You have the ability to spot strategic issues and challenge your customers, and could usefully develop your skills further.

**17-20:** You are a good strategist and recognise the questions to ask. Provided you have the soft skills to ask them well, you can add enormous value.