



# How to Get a Seat at the Table

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# The Foundation for Getting a Seat at the Table

Over the last several decades, the role of an HR department in an organization has changed dramatically. Historically, HR has been thought of as the group responsible for hiring, terminations, administering employee benefits, and intervening on employee relations and performance matters. However, in recent years, the HR function has evolved, expanding its capabilities to be a fundamental component for driving cultural change and supporting organizational growth. But to provide this level of value to an organization, HR leaders need to work to get a seat at the boardroom table so they can be at the center of the conversation and give the C-Suite an opportunity to leverage their capabilities.

How can this be done? By becoming a strategic business partner to the organization.

## What is a Strategic Business Partner?

You may have heard the concept of strategic business partner but might not have seen a formal definition. BambooHR says it well within the context of an HR Business Partner:

*A strategic business partner is a leader who is included in conversations about the future, mission, goals, and overall strategy of a company or organization. A strategic business partner, while not a member of the C-suite or executive leadership team, has a voice in their HR conversations. A strategic business partner is a consultant whose opinions and ideas are valued. The HR business partner is generally considered to be a strategic business partner that can offer recommendations, make decisions, and carry out goals.*

## The First Step to Becoming a Strategic Business Partner: Change Your Perspective

If you've ever been hiking in the mountains, you know that when you start out everything is higher than you and it can be really challenging to get a good view of everything that is around you. But as you continue along your path, rising in altitude, suddenly you see things from a different vantage point and your perspective of your surroundings changes dramatically. When you reach the top, you can see mountains close, far away, to your right, left, and behind you. At high levels of altitude, you're seeing how everything fits together and what the landscape looks like as a complete picture. In business, this is called the "30,000 foot view".

To be a strategic business partner, we need to change the angle at which we are looking at the business as HR professionals. Often, even if we're in an HR Leadership role, we likely are focused on our own functional area and are looking at the business from a much closer angle than those of the executive leadership team and the board.

## HR's Role: Be the Connection Point Between Initiatives & Business Outcomes

In the HR world, we are naturally focused on people. As a result, we view the business from this perspective. We focus on answering the following questions such as:

- How many people do we have and how many do we need?
- How do employees feel about our culture?
- Are we providing employees with rewarding career opportunities?
- What is our level of employee engagement?

Often at the functional level, we are focused on the things that we are doing in HR such as implementing a new policy, enhancing internal mobility programs, or expanding our total rewards program. While these are important objectives, they are **initiatives** and one of many components to running a business. In contrast, organizational leadership is focused on broader **strategic business outcomes** such as revenue growth, profitability, and shareholder returns, which are ultimately the metrics that keep an organization running.

*Our role in HR as a strategic business partner is to be the connection point to show how HR initiatives influence strategic business outcomes.*

### The Defining Traits of a Strategic Business Partner

Now that we know **what** a strategic business partner is, I'd like to introduce **how** you become a strategic business partner.

To start, I'd like to lift out a key phrase from the quoted definition in the first section: "A strategic business partner is a consultant whose opinions and ideas are valued.". If you think someone whose ideas you value, why is that the case? Likely, it's because they've demonstrated a certain level of expertise above and beyond the norm and gained your trust as a result. The same is true when it comes to gaining the trust of other C-suite executives in your organization. To get a seat at the table, you must demonstrate that you have a unique level of expertise so you can offer appropriate recommendations, make decisions, and carry out goals.

When it comes to being an HR Leader who is a strategic business partner, demonstrating this high level of expertise is rooted in five key characteristics. If you can possess these traits, then you are well on your way to getting a seat at the table.

## **Demonstrate Clear ROI on People Initiatives**

Typically, HR is not recognized as revenue-generating function of an organization. As a result, the first question that is asked when a people initiative is brought forward is: "How much will this cost?". Instead of responding with how much an initiative will cost the organization, strategic business partners frame up their proposals to leadership in terms of how much the organization will need to invest and how much return they will gain on that investment. Developing people initiatives with this mindset leads to an entirely different conversation with your leaders.

## **Bring Multiple C-Suite Leaders Together**

A few years back, I read an article from Deloitte that presented a concept called: The symphonic C-suite. The idea here is that instead of operating as independent subject matter experts, the C-suite must operate as a cohesive unit to achieve strategic objectives. Since people are an integral part of every aspect of an organization, the CHRO or HR leader is in a unique position to bring the c-suite together. However, it starts with taking proactive steps to be the "connector" among the team by being a champion for collaboration and teamwork.

## **Understand the Business**

Have you ever been in a conference call or meeting and suddenly the "Wah, Wah, Wah" scene from Charlie Brown is what is coming to mind? Especially if you are in a large organization with many departments, it is not uncommon to participate in meetings where you might feel a bit lost. However, what sets a strategic business partner apart is their ability to truly understand the business. This includes four fundamental components:

- The Business Model
- Operations
- Competitive Landscape
- Organizational Strategy

If you can understand these components, you'll be more prepared to walk into many different conversations and be a participant instead of a listener.

## **Connect People Initiatives to Strategic Goals**

As I've shared before, the C-Suite is focused on business outcomes such as revenue, profitability, and shareholder returns, and develops strategic goals to meet these targets. As HR leaders are made aware of these strategic goals, there are four questions that can be asked that can help identify where HR can have an influence in the process:

- **Workforce Planning** – What kind of talent do we need to achieve the organization's strategic goals?
- **Organizational Design** – Is the organizational structure efficient and effective to support strategic goals?
- **Change Management** – What can we be doing to effectively support change within the organization as a result of the goals?
- **Diversity and Inclusion** – Will the achievement of strategic goals have an impact on diversity and inclusion?

## **Build Strategic Relationships Within the Organization**

Lastly, your ability to become a strategic business partner depends heavily upon the type of relationships you are able to build within an organization. By building strategic relationships, you can connect with the people who have the right attitude, experience, and influence to help you. These are the key types of individuals you will want to be connected with:

- Coach – Someone who is truly invested in your professional development.
- Advocate – Someone who will be an advocate for you in conversations with others.
- Connector – Someone who will introduce you to the right people.
- Influencer – Someone who has significant decision-making influence in the organization.
- Informer – Someone who is able to provide valuable information to keep you updated and aware.

Building these relationships will provide a great foundation for helping you be at the center of the important conversations and drive your initiatives forward.



# The Basics of Demonstrating the ROI of People Initiatives

A fundamental skill for any HR leader to develop is demonstrating how investments in people initiatives can add value to the bottom line of the organization and have an impact on revenue, growth, and innovation. If you are a leader looking to gain the attention of the C-Suite, showing how your work influences their strategic objectives is one of the quickest ways to start “speaking their language”.

However, one of the greatest challenges in determining the ROI of people initiatives is the fact that in many cases, there are intangible benefits associated with them which can make it hard to show how these strategies lead to measurable results. To overcome this challenge, we will be using the concept of Employee Lifetime Value as a basis for how you can easily show the benefits of your people initiatives.

## What is Employee Lifetime Value?

According to an article published by Greenhouse, Employee Lifetime Value (ELTV) is the total net value over time that a team member brings to the organization.

When a team member joins your organization, they typically don't create a lot of output initially. They need to spend time in orientation, complete onboarding tasks, get acquainted with systems, and learn the culture as well as the job. At this point, there is a lot of cost invested in getting the person hired on through the recruiting and interview process so there isn't much return on the investment being realized.

So, from the point of starting to fully contribute to putting in their resignation notice, there is a period that the team member is continuing to do things to grow revenue, whether it be directly through a client-service type of role or indirectly through an operational or administrative role.

## Connect the Dots Between Investment and ELTV

There is an abundance of research that proves that the more an organization invests in employees, the longer they will stay. As an HR leader, it is your responsibility to create strategies to invest in people so that they remain engaged in the organization and therefore increase their ELTV. In turn, the longer employees stick around, a greater return on investment is realized. To make the case for your people initiatives, it is critical that you connect the dots for others in the c-suite on how people programs and benefits are extending the lifetime value of an employee and, as a result, creating real results in the form of revenue increases, cost savings, or other metrics that are relevant to your organization.

## Solidify Your Case With Data

Greenhouse conducted a study on the impact of investing in some different areas in the talent experience. Below were their findings:

- A better onboarding program can decrease a team member's ramp-up time by 30%, getting them to the point of fully contributing sooner and saving the cost.
- A better hire, using a data-driven approach to sourcing, interviewing, and closing, can outperform a peer by 20%
- Great management and development practices with coaching and training can improve a team member's performance by 20% in a year
- Great management and culture practices can add a year to a team member's tenure and increasing the value that person brings to the organization

Most organizations can measure the amount of time it takes to hire and onboard a team member as well as measure their performance as it relates to revenue and cost savings. As you are developing your people initiatives, I would encourage you to gain as much data as possible on how investments could lead to real results for your organization.



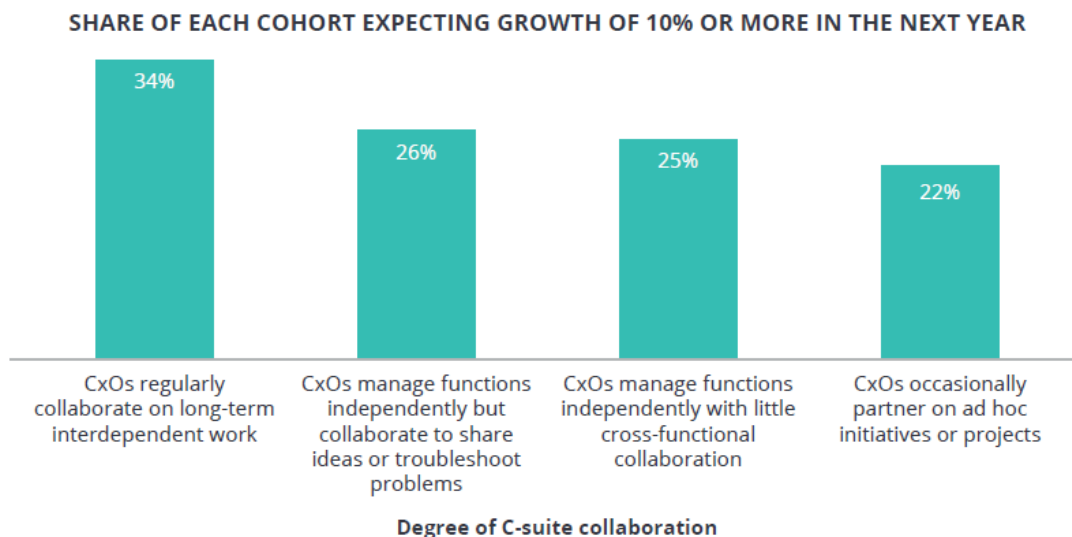
# How to Contribute to a "Symphonic C-Suite"

In 2019, I came across a concept called "The Symphonic C-Suite". I learned about this term through Deloitte's 2018 Global Human Capital Trends Report, and was immediately drawn to the benefits of operating under this philosophy.

As an HR leader, I've found myself in many circumstances where I've needed to collaborate with our Chief Marketing Officer, Chief Information Officer, Chief Financial Officer, and other C-Level executives within our firm. What I've found through these experiences is that when we work closely together and communicate effectively, we can leverage our individual expertise to create a much better outcome than if we operated as siloed professionals.

With the many touchpoints that HR has across an organization, HR leaders are in a unique position to get the C-Suite "singing the same song" and, as a result, earn their seat at the boardroom table.

Chart: Influence of C-suite leadership style on company growth



Source: *The rise of the social enterprise: 2018 Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends*



## **Showcase your subject matter expertise**

The first step to contributing to a Symphonic C-Suite is to showcase your subject matter expertise as an HR professional. This will be critical to building trust with other C-Suite leaders, so that you become the trusted advisor that they will lean on as they execute on initiatives and projects. Once you've demonstrated your expertise, look for opportunities where you can specifically point out how HR can help others be successful in achieving their strategic objectives.

## **Become a connector**

As I said, HR leaders have a unique vantage point in the organization where they get to interact with a wide variety of business groups and individuals. Use this to your advantage to connect C-Suite executives together and highlight how one might be able to help the other. In many cases, your executives may not realize the benefits of collaborating in certain circumstances, so if you can help connect the dots for them, you will position yourself as an integral part of the executive team.

## **Seek out collaboration opportunities**

At BKD, we promoted the saying "Don't Go It Alone". We recognize that there is a wealth of knowledge at our firm and our clients (internal and external) deserve to experience the benefits of multiple areas of expertise to achieve the best outcome. Be intentional in looking for ways you can collaborate with others, even if you think you have it all figured out on your own. You never know when someone else might expose a blind spot in your plan. By seeking out collaboration opportunities, you are playing an active role in building a Symphonic C-Suite.

## **Promote cross-functional communication**

To fully realize the benefits of a Symphonic C-Suite, there needs to be cross-functional communication on a regular basis. As an HR leader, you have an opportunity to model this behavior. For example, if the HR department is sending out a firmwide email to all employees, consider sharing this with your corporate communications executive to see if there is an ideal time for the email to be sent and if there are any potential conflicts with other internal communications. The more you involve others in your work, the closer you will be to building a Symphonic C-Suite.

# The Fundamentals of Organizational Acumen

Have you ever been in a meeting with leaders from another department in your organization and suddenly the "Wah Wa Wa Wah Wa Wa" words from Charlie Brown's teacher is all that you can think of? (If you need a refresher on this reference, [click here](#))

As I've progressed through my career, I've found myself in this scenario countless times and it is always a helpful reminder that to relate to other c-suite leaders, it's essential to understand how different segments of an organization work and how everything fits together to make the business run on a daily basis. Furthermore, it is important to be able to relate to the c-suite and connect with them to articulate how our HR Initiatives are going to have a significant impact on the organization and gain their support for successful execution. To effectively do this, you will need to develop your Organizational Acumen.

## What is Organizational Acumen?

The concept of Organizational Acumen is being able to understand specifically your organization's business model, operations, financial goals, and competitive position and be able to apply it in your decision-making processes. When you approach the c-suite with a new HR initiative, it is expected that you have this level of knowledge so you can "speak their language" when laying out your business case.

## The Four Components of Organizational Acumen

### The Business Model – What Does Our Organization Do?

At the most basic level, you should understand what products or services you provide, and what the major sources of revenue and cost are. While this may seem simple and something you would have knowledge of before you are hired, the more an organization expands into niche services, the more work you'll have to do to keep up.

### Operations – How Does Our Organization Work?

The operations of a business can be complex, especially as the organization increases in size. The two basic questions to ask to understand operations are how do we produce our products and services and what are the processes we use to get work done? To learn about the operations of your organization, it is possible you may need to visit with leaders from different departments as there may be various operational practices unique to a segment of your business.

## The Four Components of Organizational Acumen cont'd

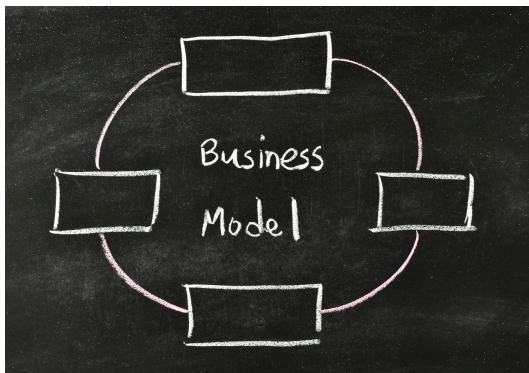
### Competitive Landscape – What is Happening in This Industry?

Especially in the current HR and employment world, this area of organizational acumen is getting lots of attention as employers are seeking to understand how they can differentiate themselves. When learning about the competitive landscape, you'll want to know who your top competitors are, what your competitive advantages and disadvantages are, and what the top industry trends are. In the accounting profession, change is happening rapidly, so this is an area I continually focus on.

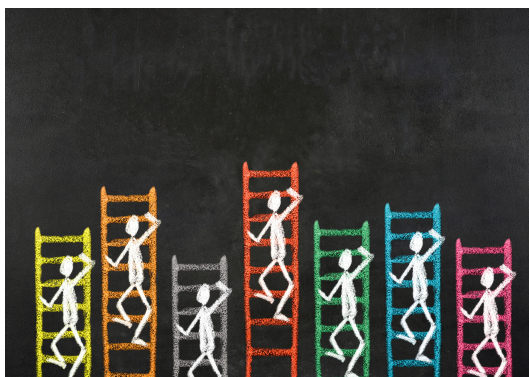
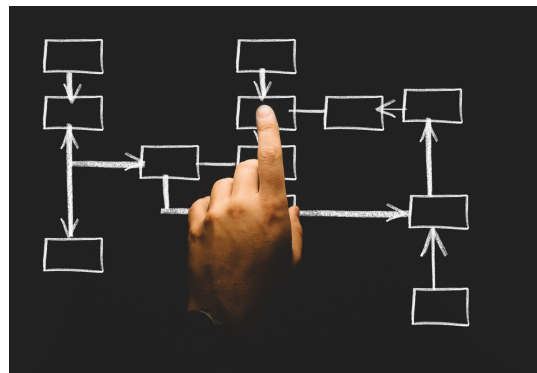
### Organizational Strategy - Where are We Headed?

The fourth component to Organizational Acumen is understanding the organizational strategy. This means understanding the most important future goals of the business from the lens of the executive leaders and what the plans are to meet those goals moving forward. Especially if you have a new CEO, this is an important step to relating to that individual.

Business Model



Operations



Competitive Landscape



Organizational Strategy

# Five Types of People HR Leaders Need to Build Relationships With

While knowledge and experiences are key to your professional success, relationships are just as important. When I was the CHRO at BKD, we made it a habit to say "Don't Go It Alone" to encourage high levels of collaboration among team members. The meaning behind this is that when you try to accomplish objectives on your own, you miss out on the opportunity to benefit from the talents and expertise of those around you. In addition, other leaders in your organization have different vantage points that you can leverage as you work to move initiatives forward.

Here are five types of people that HR leaders will need to build relationships with to become a strategic business partner:

## **Coach**

Do you have someone who is in your corner when it comes to your professional development and can lead you through challenging situations? By having this type of relationship, you give yourself an edge with the capability to lean on another individual for ideas, support, and trusted counsel on a variety of topics. Coaches can come in a variety of forms. In some cases, your coach may be your manager. In other scenarios, you might need to seek out an external coach in your network or elsewhere that you can build a relationship with.

## **Advocate**

The reality is that you can't be included in every important conversation in your organization. That's why you need an advocate – someone who be a champion for you and your ideas with the right individuals. In many instances, this could be your immediate manager who regularly engages with higher-level leaders. If your advocate brings your thoughts and ideas forward often enough, you might find yourself being tapped on the shoulder to participate in key conversations and have the chance to put your initiatives into play.

## **Connector**

Do you know people who are natural networkers? Some people have a passion for connecting with others and some aren't as skilled or interested in it. In any case, building a relationship with someone who will introduce you to the right people is an important component to becoming a strategic business partner. As the old saying goes, "you don't know what you don't know". Having someone who can connect you with the right people to build your knowledge and provide a different perspective that you may not have considered before. Find that person who loves connecting people and become allies with them.

## Influencer

Depending on your level in your organization, you may or may not have significant decision-making influence on key strategies. In these instances, you must build relationships with someone who has this type of authority. Oftentimes, this is someone who has a direct line into your executive leadership reporting to your Chief Executive Officer. By having a connection point to an influencer, you not only have a better chance of getting your initiatives moved forward, but you also have another resource to refine your ideas before taking them higher up.

## Informer

Certain individuals in your organization may have a lot of different touchpoints with various departments. These people are great to connect with to improve your organizational acumen and inform you of key updates within your organization. If you can build a relationship with an informer, you'll be equipped with the right data to make good decisions and develop initiatives and ideas that others will be receptive to. The only caveat to building this relationship is to be respectful of the person's role and the type of information they can and cannot share with you depending upon your role.

## Who Do You Need to Build Relationships With?



# About the Author

## **Julie Cummings SPHR, SHRM-SCP**

Julie believes that building a great employee experience begins with prioritizing employee feedback and is achieved through strategic partnerships with the C-Suite. During a 12-year career at BKD CPAs and Advisors, she leveraged this philosophy to build an HR department from the ground up and operationalize the people function to provide high levels of internal service to employees and leaders. This included creating effective hiring practices, optimizing performance management programs, delivering a comprehensive total rewards package, and maintaining high levels of compliance.

In her more than 25 years of HR experience, she has remained committed to lifelong learning and advancing the human resources profession by serving in a variety of leadership positions for local and state HR associations as well as mentoring young professionals launching their HR career. She has received recognition with the Springfield Business Journal's Top HR Professional of the Year and Most Influential Women awards.

Julie is an active member of the Society for Human Resources Management where she holds the Senior Certified Professional (SHRM-SCP) designation. She also holds the Senior Professional in Human Resources® (SPHR®) designation from the HR Certification Institute®. Julie is a graduate of Missouri State University, Springfield, with an M.B.A. degree.

