

When I was at the 2004 Annual Global Conference of the Milken Institute in Los Angeles, I asked Michael Milken, the Chairman, when he thought we would see more female CEOs. He responded that he wasn't sure exactly when, but he was certain that they would come from the HR channel.

The Milken Institute is a publicly supported, non-partisan, independent economic think-tank that helps businesses and public policy leaders identify and implement new ideas for creating broad-based growth.

Whether male or female, the fundamental challenge that underlies all other challenges to becoming an HR business partner in Asia is the discovery and realisation of opportunities from what appear to be problems on the road to becoming a trusted strategic partner. We can only see these by shifting our perspectives and the assumptions of our experiences.

The second point is that the CEO faces the exact same fundamental challenge in discovering opportunities, including if he or she views the human resource director singularly as an implementer and not as a strategic partner managing one of the company's most critical assets – its human capital. Thus, the CEO and the HR director have a significant challenge in common. Remembering this as you navigate your way will be helpful and empowering.

The third point regarding this challenge is that most humans upon seeing a problem want to avoid it.

The second challenge is leading and influencing up in order to coach the leadership in your company and enable them to understand the concept that executives are human capital, a vital asset, and why. Also, to communicate in financial terms and metrics the value of the company's executive assets.



Rise to the challenge

Do your homework if you want to become a trusted HR business partner in Asia. In return, you will command the respect of your superiors

This will entail developing your ability to communicate the regional and global economics of the talent crunch.

The other hurdle to cross is to perceive yourself as a partner by beginning to think about the business challenges the company faces from the perspective of total and complete responsibility as a partner does. More than 6,000 years ago, famous Chinese philosopher Lao Tzu wrote the quote, "The way to do is to be". I think the essential point that he was making is applicable here.

Then, the HR practitioner has to prepare himself or herself for this business partnership and he or she has to be credible in that role by developing the quality of their thoughts and business thinking capability. There are three aspects to this challenge.

First, to do this requires deepening your understanding of not only the company's business but also the overall regional and global business environment. Ideally, I am an advocate of including subjects such as psychology, human dynamics, organisational development and humanities in an MBA

course, as well as HR executives obtaining MBAs (or the equivalent in business experience). It is not only necessary to take as many courses as your funds or company will permit but to also plan your own education programme. This is the second aspect of this challenge which is to develop a habit of discipline for continuous education. The third aspect is to practise wearing your CEO's, board members', shareholders' and other stakeholders' hats. Put it on and review the issues from those perspectives.

The fifth challenge is to begin to communicate your newly gained depth of understanding and insights to the C level. Once you find the opportunities to do so, your colleagues and the C level executives will begin to notice the quality of your thoughts and the depth of your understanding. Now you are in a position from which coaching up can be highly effective.

The sixth challenge may be getting enough time with your CEO to communicate this. If this is the case, build credibility and coach those around the CEO.

The development described here is not sequential and there will be no graduation that will tell you that you are ready. As you engage the process, you will come to know yourself.

There is no guarantee that your CEO will grow as much as you would have at that point. In any case, you would have built your personal impact, credibility and a reputation with others in the organisation as one prepared for the strategic business partner role. After coaching, influencing and leading up, if your CEO is not up to leading a collaborative intelligent learning organisation, then you may want to look further to join a company where you can indeed make a difference. Your capabilities will be much sought after.

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