

**Mercer Human Capital Consulting, Singapore Management University  
& Singapore Business Federation**

**Strategic Human Capital Management  
Executive Education Program**

*Module One,  
Day Two*

**“Building Your Personal Impact as a  
Human Capital Leader”**

**“Key Challenges to Becoming an HR Business Partner in Asia”**

by

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Good morning. Thank you to Mercer Human Resources Consulting, Singapore Management University and the Singapore Business Federation for inviting me here today. It's a pleasure to be here.

I'd like to begin by recounting the story of an experiment that was conducted at the University of Arizona<sup>1</sup> at a conference on consciousness in 2002 because it provides a compelling analogy.

In this experiment, the observers were asked to closely watch two teams of participants throwing a ball. The observers were told to focus on the number of times the team in white threw and caught the ball. While they were doing this, a man dressed in a gorilla costume walked directly through the line of sight between the participants throwing and catching the ball. What percentage of the observers did *not* see the gorilla? I would appreciate your participation here. Please, let's have a show of hands.

There are four choices; how many of you believe that 10% of the observers did not see the gorilla, 25%, 50%, 75 %? The answer is 50% of the people watching the ball throwers did not see the gorilla. And this was at a conference during which all were focused on consciousness!

Why am I telling you this story and what does it have to do with the key challenges to becoming an HR business partner in Asia?

I'm telling the story because it describes the fundamental challenge that underlies all other challenges: the discovery and realization of opportunities from what appear to be problems on your road to becoming a trusted strategic partner. Indeed it is the fundamental challenge that you face in shifting the current mindset in your organization and influencing up.

The first point of the analogy is that if we go through the business day fully focused only on the business tasks as they are 'at hand', we will miss opportunities that are out of your focus. We can only see them by shifting our perspectives. This *is* the way problems get transformed. Seeing a gorilla is the beginning of the process.

The Second point is that most humans upon seeing a gorilla have a 'knee jerk' reaction that it must be a dangerous problem. It can't possibly be good. It's a gorilla! Let's *avoid* it. It's the same, when you see your CEO or any C level executive that thinks of you (or you *think* thinks of you) as a policeman or singularly an implementer and not a strategic partner managing one of the company's most critical assets, its human capital.

As HR leaders, *you* must change the prescription in the lenses of your own glasses, so that opportunities may be grasped. These opportunities can *only* be perceived by changing the lenses, the assumptions through which you experience that which you observe.

The third point is that your CEO faces the exact same challenge in discovering and realizing opportunities beyond his or her focus or that first appear as problems. So here you have a significant fundamental challenge in common.

While you may see the CEO as a challenge, he or she may not even see an HR leader in the role of a strategic partner. Remembering this as you navigate your way will be helpful and empowering.

What are the key challenges that rest on top of the fundamental one just described that I see for HR leaders in becoming an HR business partners in Asia?

The second challenge is Leading and influencing up

- to coach the leadership in your company to understand the concept that executives are human capital, a vital asset and why,
- to communicate in financial terms and metrics the value of the company's executive assets, its human capital.

This will entail developing your ability to communicate the regional and global economics of the talent crunch. This is based on the dramatic changes in the demographics of the population and the revolution taking place in the information economy, which is shortening the life of meaningful knowledge. Because knowledge is changing so quickly, information is increasingly more perishable. Continuous education is a must. Alternatively executives' knowledge will become outdated and irrelevant. At the same time, business challenges are growing in their complexity and thus there is a need for executives to build their capabilities to handle complexity, if the company is to be competitive.

Once the CEO understands this, he/she will more readily perceive of the role of the HR leader as a strategic partner.

The third challenge is for you to perceive of yourself as a partner, to begin to think about the business challenges the company faces from the perspective of total and complete responsibility as a partner does. More than six thousand years ago Lao Tzu wrote that quote, "the way to do is to be". I think the essential point that he was making is applicable here. If you can not take on the part or even perceive of your self in the role, no one else will, nor will you be able to succeed in it.

The fourth challenge is to prepare yourself for this business partnership, prepare yourself to be credible in that role by developing the quality of your OWN thoughts and your 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 MBA's studying psychology, human dynamics, organizational development and liberal arts. As well -Ideally- I am a proponent of HR executives obtaining MBAs. I recognize that this is costly and often out of reach for many. The degree is not the necessity but rather it is the learning that is requisite. Cross disciplines are truly needed in executives, if a business is to compete globally.

To underscore this point, When I was at the 2004 Annual Global Conference of the Milken Institute in Los Angeles, I ask Michael Milken, the Chairman, when did he think we would see more women CEOs. He responded that he wasn't sure exactly when, but he was quite sure that they would come from the HR channel.

Turning back to the fourth challenge, whether male or female, it is not only necessary to take as many courses as your funds or company will permit but also to plan your own self education program, which is The second aspect of this challenge, to develop a habit of /discipline for continuous education.

To do this, one must develop a reading discipline and one that includes

- respected business publications such as the Economist;
- leading business school periodicals and journals such as those from SMU, Wharton, Harvard.
- leading books on business, not only those focused on HR or OD issues.
- Web sites of think tanks such as your national center for strategic and international studies and those over seas. Learn about the topics that are under discussion and keep current every quarter on the latest issues.

The internet delivers you the library of the world and access to courses from all over the world. Since 2003 Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) has been putting all of their courses on the internet for free! The challenge is no longer access; it is whether you will use the resources.

The third aspect of this challenge is to practice wearing your CEO's, board members', shareholders' and other stakeholders' hats. Put it on and review the issues from those perspectives, literally, play the role in your mind. How will the developments and issues affect your company's future, in each of its various business channels, and in the short, medium and longer terms, etc?

The fifth challenge, now that you've prepared yourself for the partner role is to begin to communicate your newly gained depth of understanding and insight to the C level. You will undoubtedly have gained confidence along the way. The challenge will be to stay alert for opportunities- those moments in which you could make contribution with a quality thought or insight, whether in meetings or the corridors. Once you find those opportunities, your colleagues and the C level executives will begin to notice the quality of your thoughts and the depth of your understanding. Your credibility will begin to take hold. Your CEO will likely be able to hear you better because you will have learned his language. Now you are in a position from which coaching up can really be effective.

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

There is an excellent book entitled "Leading up, How to Lead Your Boss so that You Both Win" by Michael Useem, a professor of management at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. While I recognize that it was written in a western context, it still offers insights that you will be able to translate in the context of your own cultures.

The first lesson in that book is, quote “Building your superiors confidence in you requires giving them your confidence. Once you and they have established it both ways, your organization may have an unbeatable competitive advantage, whatever the battlefield.”<sup>ii</sup>

I recognize that in the context of Asian cultures all of this may appear daunting or distant but then again it was Lao Tzu who said “the way to do is to be”, not a westerner.

The development that I have described 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 will have at that point. In any case, you will have built your personal impact and credibility and a reputation with others in the organization 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 organization, 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.

Thank you.

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<sup>i</sup> *Toward a Science of Consciousness*, "Tucson 2002" Tucson Convention Center Music Hall, Tucson, Arizona April 8-12, 2002, Sponsored by the Center for Consciousness Studies at The University of Arizona

<sup>ii</sup> “Leading up, How to Lead Your Boss so that You Both Win” Michael Useem, © 2001 (*crown Business, New York, NY*)