

HRBP Report 2022

Gary A. DePaul, PhD

A Qualitative Research Summary about the HR Business Partner Role

- Clarifies the function
- Lists the skills and qualities
- Reveals 7 success factors
- Explains role Challenges
- Describes how some manage HRBP teams

What you can learn from other HRBPs about effectively engaging and collaborating with BPs

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Validate and Continue

In the report, you'll validate some of your behaviors by comparing them with the behaviors of the interviewees. The report may even help you reveal some of the unconscious behaviors you've been doing that are effective.

Start and Stop

The insights from the interviewees can help you determine what you can start doing and behaviors that you should stop doing.

Notations

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APA citation:

DePaul, G. A. (2022). *The HRBP Report: A Qualitative Research Summary about the HR Business Partner Role* (Report No. 2022). Gary DePaul Leadership.

<https://www.garyadepaul.com/The-HRBP-Report>

Other editions:

PDF: Interactive (free)

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About the Report

From the Author, Gary A. DePaul, PhD

Let's face it: being an effective Human Resource Business Partner, or HRBP, is not easy. If you monitor professional social media, listen to attendees at HR conferences and chapter events, and read blogs and articles, you'll learn that too many professionals struggle to become perceived as trusted partners to the business.

One thing apparent is that many struggle to understand the HRBP role and function. Not surprisingly, many HR professionals who want to become HRBPs don't understand what is involved in performing the role or what they need to learn to succeed. Organizations' HRBP workforces vary in maturity. As a result, professionals may have the title but function less like an HRBP and more like generalists, employee-relations consultants, recruiters, or a collection of eclectic HR-related functions.

While HRBP models describe the role hypothetically, they may not articulate effective HRBP practices. To overcome this, I researched the role and created the HRBP Report for you. Using a qualitative approach, I interviewed practitioners who successfully built strong partnerships with business executives. Because I did a qualitative study, the findings aren't generalizable. However, you'll find value in how these HRBPs describe their role, function, struggles, and successes. Enjoy!

HRBPs: Human Resource Business Partners

BPs: Business Partners who work in management within a line of business (from C-Suite to department heads to managers in a department)

This report is primarily written in the first and second person and speaks to the HRBP reader.

The study

From 2020 to 2021, I interviewed 18 HRBPs to discover content themes about:

- Their role
- What makes an HRBP successful
- Their challenges and struggles
- How they learned HR and their role

The interviewees

Of the 18, three were managers of a team, and two were Chief HR Officers (or heads of HR). All worked with BPs, but those in management did so at a higher level within their organization.

Demographics

The 18 work in the continental United States from California to Florida. Some come from small organizations with less than 500 employees, while others work in global organizations with more than 50,000 employees. Most have more than ten years of experience, and none were new to the field.

To conduct the study, I asked more than 100 LinkedIn connections to volunteer.

Five knew me when I managed teams in large organizations.

One had been my client.

The rest interacted with me through LinkedIn.

The Function

HRBP Maturity Levels

In the forthcoming book, HRBP 3.0, you'll learn about the HRBP Maturity Levels, which I depicted in the infographic (described in the following three pages).

As an HRBP, your foundation is strategic work. All tactical work supports the business strategy, and your HR department has outsourced most of the transactional work to other HR professionals or automated with self-service.

Much of your tactical work is project management, in which you orchestrate CoEs in the design, development, and delivery of solutions or interventions.

What I described is HRBP 3.0, in which the role has evolved so that, even when working tactically, you are thinking strategically and ensuring the work aligns strategically.

Almost all interviewees appeared to function at the Optimized Level (3.0). Interviewees discussed five HRBP functions, which are described in the remainder of this topic.

The Five HRBP Functions

1. Be Strategic
2. Act as a Change Agent
3. Protect the Brand
4. Guide and Coach
5. Leverage Analytics

The HRBP Maturity Levels

The Shift from Being Transaction-focused to Solution-focused to Results-focused

HRBP 1.0: Hybrid

“Work in Progress”

Directives

- Work as generalists
- Work strategically with the business

Support from the Organization

Little to no professional development

Results

- Focus more on transactional work
- Lack strategic capabilities
- Difficult to win trust with the business

Many organizations still use the hybrid HRBP role!

Directive

- Remove generalist responsibilities
- Expect HRBPs to concentrate more on strategic work
- Gatekeep and manage solution-focused CoE* work

Support from the Organization

- Create a CoE process for developing solutions
- Train HRBPs to:
 - Execute the CoE process
 - Build stronger business-partner relationships

Results

- Too often, new HRBP training is inadequate or focused on the wrong capabilities
- Work tends to be tactical and transactional rather than strategic

* CoE means either Centers of Excellence or Centers of Expertise. Examples of CoEs are talent development, talent management, organizational effectiveness, and talent acquisition.

Directive

- Leverage a business-driven methodology
- Use a revived CoE process that emphasizes analysis and being solution-neutral / results-focused

Support from the Organization

Implement and train a business-driven methodology and process

Results

- Substantially contribute to achieving business and performance goals
- Build stronger business-partner relationships
- Balance between strategic and tactical work

1. Be Strategic

Strategic HRBPs are well-versed in the organization's strategy and understand the alignment between the organization's and BP's strategy. While engaging with BPs, you help ground BPs to the strategy by:

- Ensuring that tactical and transactional requests support the strategy.
- Helping BPs develop their strategy and clarifying the employee performance needed to support the strategy.

Along with the BP's strategy, you have your own people strategy. One interviewee noted:

"Like the business, HRBPs create a plan or strategy that supports the BP's."

Another interviewee described the HRBP function this way:

"HRBPs know where the company is headed, and they bring people with them. They are business leaders, shepherds, counselors, and trusted advisors to their customers. They help BPs and employees shine a light on how their work contributes to strategy realization and the promise to the customer."

For HRBPs to function strategically, organizations need to provide structure and support.

HRBP managers need to coach their teams to balance strategic, tactical, and transactional work. They remove barriers, coach their team, and position them to succeed.

2. Act as A Change Agent

As an HRBP, you champion the business and organization. You help BPs align with and implement their strategies.

You also anticipate the performance needs before BPs express them. You ascertain how business decisions, projects, new initiatives, and processes affect employees. You then develop plans with your BPs to address change.

Here is how one interviewee described this function:

“The HRBP works closely with BPs to become keenly aware of business needs. HRBPs then anticipate the people’s needs [and performance needs] to enable the business results that BPs want to achieve.”

3. Protect the Brand

HRBPs model the culture and core values of the organization. You help others understand your role as it relates to the business and the culture. You partner and advocate for diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB). Some organizations create and execute a DEIB strategy for their BPs (which aligns with an enterprise DEIB strategy).

“HRBPs are protectors of the brand, culture, and strategy. They are a bridge that brings known (and unknown) business functions together at precisely the right time to create spectacular results.”

You also represent the employees and act as their voice when working and collaborating with BPs. You contribute the employee perspective when problem-solving and act as the liaison between the workforce and the business.

Giving voice to those not at the table is a way to embrace inclusion and belonging. It also mitigates unrealistic performance expectations of the workforce.

4. Guide and Coach

HRBPs know HR processes, and BPs frequently need help navigating people-related changes. Part of what you do is translate what BPs want into HR terms and tasks.

You coach BPs on how to develop their people. BPs own their people's performance and are responsible for developing the workforce to perform effectively.

You coach BPs to own and shape their culture. You hold BPs accountable so that BPs own their business and problems. You don't allow BPs to pass ownership to HR.

5. Leverage Analytics

Effective HRBPs use advanced analytics to support and drive business objectives. Of the five functions, this one, most likely, is underutilized.

A People Profession Survey from CIPD reports that, of HR professionals polled:

- 37% collect and use basic HR data.
- 6% use advanced analytical techniques.

HRBPs who want to get and maintain a seat at the table (so to speak) need to bring something of value to BPs. HR analytics brings insight when making business plans and considering what workforce performance is needed.

BPs are accountable for the health of their business unit's culture, workforce performance, and their people's development. HRBPs coach BPs in managing these areas.

Qualities and Skills

The Iceberg Model: What Drives Observable Behaviors

Visible on the water surface

Observable behaviors

Invisible below the water surface

One level underneath:

Practices, Knowledge, and Skill Capabilities (most concrete)

Two levels underneath:

Beliefs

Three levels underneath:

Guiding Principles

Four levels underneath:

Qualities (most abstract)

“HRBPs need to be highly credible, trustworthy, passionate, and insatiably curious. They must explore continuous improvement with relentless fervor. They need to lead at helping others see what they see while enabling BPs to believe that they got there on their own.”

Skills

Of the skills that interviewees identified, business acumen is probably the most underrated and misunderstood. Business knowledge or business intelligence may be more descriptive.

Business acumen is more than business etiquette. It involves learning your organization's industry, the marketplace, competitors, suppliers, investors, and variables that can affect your organization.

It also means learning your BPs' business unit or department. If your BP is the CIO, your knowledge should include the technology field, professional associations, standards, and certifications.

"If you don't display a sense of confidence in what you are saying or doing, BPs will walk all over you, which is the best-case scenario. Alternatively, BPs may dismiss you altogether."

Interviewees identified the following HRBP skills:

- Leadership (results in influencing)
- Collaboration
- Relationship building
- Empathy
- Coaching

- Critical thinking
- Systemic thinking
- Data analytics

- Agility
- Facilitation
- Negotiation

- Business acumen
- Strategic thinking
- Resource alignment

- Project management
- Change management
- Delegation

Qualities

Your HRBP behaviors are based on practices, knowledge, and skills. Those are based on beliefs about HR and the HRBP role. The beliefs are founded by guiding principles, which are shaped by qualities.

If you sincerely adopt HRBP qualities, the guiding principles, beliefs, practices (along with the knowledge and skills) will drive the appropriate behaviors.

From the study, interviewees identified 11 HRBP qualities, which I categorized as balanced, analytic, capable, and growth.

If you serve as an HRBP but lack a strong desire for continuous improvement, your ability to contribute to your BPs' business goals will be limited. The interviewees would argue that the same applies to the other qualities. Each quality manifest in your behaviors. However, if one quality is lacking, then so will your effectiveness.

"During the most challenging times, HRBPs must always be fair, objective, steady, and relied upon. Ultimately, they must love to serve."

The Qualities of Effective HRBPs

Balanced

- Congruency
- Humility
- Trustworthiness

Analytic

- Fair
- Objective
- Credible

Capable

- Confidence
- Executive Presence
- Courage, Bold Decisions, and Calculated Risk-taking

Growth

- Continuous Improvement
- Insatiably Curious

Challenges and Struggles

Interviewees identified several challenges and constraints that I've placed in four categories.

HR Department Constraints

HRBPs may have time and budget constraints, but this may be true with any role.

A conservative HR department might limit what HRBPs can do, restricting effective HRBP performance.

Managers assign too much transactional work to HRBPs, consuming their time. For these HRBPs, their strategic responsibilities become secondary and almost an afterthought.

The HR team might have an ineffective structure to support BPs effectively.

Self-Imposed Constraints

As with any role, we often constrain how we think and act because we don't know better.

For example, you may mistakenly think you need a title or credentials to gain credibility with BPs.

When you don't think of yourself as strategic, you tend to be more reactive to problems.

When you believe yourself credible, you might ineffectively communicate your value proposition.

"Transactional and tactical HR work is essential, but they are the most significant barrier to the HRBP's strategic role."

BPs Don't Want to Partner

BPs may think of you as their own HR administrative assistant. To them, you are a commodity rather than a partner. Too often, BPs think about HR only as a cost center needed for compliance. HR is an unfortunate necessity.

BPs may not value you or take you seriously, which can be telling when they exclude you from crucial meetings and strategy discussions.

Environmental Constraints

In some cases, the work environment can become toxic, making functioning as an effective HRBP difficult. Toxic cultures can overwhelm even the best HRBP. As Geary Rummler wrote,

If you pit a good performer against a bad system, the system will win almost every time.

"A seat at the table is an earned privilege but not a right. When HRBPs fail to understand the business and lead with "HR speak" or relegate themselves as order-takers, they will struggle, and BPs will distance themselves. When HRBPs lead with service and help solve top-of-mind business problems for BPs, they will start to get noticed."

"I haven't experienced BPs perceiving me as an admin assistant but as the "police." BPs have been reluctant to trust me because they fear I would get them in trouble or rat them out...for what I don't know. It took a long time to overcome that perception and build the necessary trust to work together effectively."

"Never appear as a solution looking for a problem. Instead, behave as the leader with the solution to the problem."

The Seven HRBP Success Factors

Seek Support

Join support groups, collaborate with other HRBPs, find mentors and sponsors from HR and the business

Learn the Business

Build your business lens with an employee viewpoint, learn how BPs run the business, develop a business perspective, learn the industry

Communicate and Empathize

Know BPs' strengths, weaknesses, and business problems, become a BP sounding board, challenge BPs, use BP language

Focus on Results

Determine needed performance to meet business needs and help BPs think about requests in terms of business goals

Add Value and Build Trust

Respond appropriately, deliver solutions, provide help, look for solid hits and quick wins, show value by your acts and contributions

Improve through Feedback

Evaluate what went well, didn't go well, and could have been done differently

Work Differently

Be creative, do things differently, make bold decisions, take calculated risks, and search for opportunities

Success Factor #1

Seek Support

Compared to other HR roles, HRBP is new. Being effective as an HRBP requires a skill set that is substantially different from other HR roles. HRBPs need to be strategic and coach BPs to manage their business strategy.

According to interviewees, learning the HRBP role shouldn't be left to chance or trial-and-error learning. You need help, which is why seeking support is crucial. Formal training courses and books about the HRBP role may be necessary but insufficient. You need to seek support, the first of the seven success factors.

Interviewees attributed part of their success to HR mentors. A mentor helps you navigate situations and operate proactively.

A few stressed that you should have mentors from the business. If your BP leads the IT department, you'll want to learn as much as possible about the IT organization and profession. Find someone to mentor you, even if it's your IT BP.

Having mentors and sponsors can be a game-changer, but so can a network of HRBPs. Interviewees emphasized that networking with HRBPs gives you another source of support. As situations occur, collaborate with them. Ask how they would handle BP challenges.

Your network shares knowledge and lessons learned and enables everyone to learn vicariously.

Seek Sponsors

"Go beyond having a mentor. Get a sponsor who has the formal power to help you navigate the company and your career path. A sponsor is someone who doesn't just advise; they open doors."

Peer Network

"Always have a mentor and continuously build a robust peer network. HRBPs need to share best practices and learn from and with each other. Never hesitate to call a peer or mentor to ask for help."

Success Factor #2

Learn the Business

When becoming an HRBP, you need to know something about human resources, which may be why hiring managers tend to recruit experienced HR professionals for their open HRBP positions.

While knowing HR is necessary, it isn't sufficient to effectively work with BPs. HRBPs need to develop a business perspective, or as one interviewee stated, they need to develop a business lens with an employee viewpoint. Developing a business perspective means researching and learning:

- The business environment
- The organization's system
- The organization's enterprise values and strategy
- Each BP's environment
- Business diagnostics

The business environment

If HRBPs want to add value, they need to learn the macro perspective. That means knowing their organization's marketplace, industry, customers, and competitors. It means monitoring regulations, political influences, and even societal opinions. Having this intelligence is one of many ways that HRBPs can add value to BPs. Recognizing and alerting BPs to the implications of environmental changes could make a difference.

Your organization's system

As humans have standard systems (skeletal, nervous, circulatory, and respiratory), the same is true with businesses. HRBPs need to have a broad understanding of those systems.

Knowledge Credible

“HRBPs must know more than HR. They must know the industry, the competitors, regulations, the impact of doing business, and internal factors: strategy, value drivers, go-to-market plans, measures of success, KPIs, and key financials. Knowing these things enables HRBPs to be effective and credible by delivering business-aligned HR services and solutions.”

Align and Balance

“Everything starts with an enterprise strategy. Four key constituents must be served: the company, the shareholders, the customers, and the employees. HRBPs work to align and balance them for the system to work. It’s up to the HRBP to recognize when that balance is off.”

Monitoring how your organization operates within the marketplace and society can give BPs remarkable insight!

From the outside, organizations appear different, but on the inside, they have the same anatomy of performance.

As an HRBP, learn your organization's anatomy and state of health.

Your organization's systems (continued)

You should know the different parts of the enterprise's system, including:

- The inputs, such as the organization's suppliers and investors
- How the organization works (the processes)
- The outputs, such as products and services for customers

It involves understanding investor and owner earnings, competitors, and even how society benefits from its existence.

For public companies, you should study the annual report and quarterly earnings in detail.

As with the business environment, knowing the organization's system gives you an additional perspective and a way to advise BPs when BPs struggle to make decisions.

Your organization's enterprise values and strategy

Most likely, HR professionals in Benefits, Recruiting, and Talent Development can perform their work without having extensive knowledge about their organization's values and strategy. Still, you would be remiss if you don't firmly comprehend how BP decisions and actions align with or against enterprise values and strategy.

Unfortunately, BPs frequently prioritize optimizing their department rather than working in concert with their peers. Likewise, the C-Suite executives often make decisions that benefit their business units at the expense of other business units and the enterprise.

When one component of an organization system optimizes, the organization often becomes suboptimal.

Because this happens frequently, Rummler and Brache identified one of the six fundamental laws of organizational systems as:

When one component of an organization system optimizes, the organization often becomes suboptimal.

Part of what makes you successful is developing an enterprise perspective to help BPs think more systemically. BPs need to consider the implications of decisions beyond their department or business unit, and you can help them do this!

Each BP's environment

In addition to the organization's environment, BPs work within their own business environment. Their environment includes industry standards. For example:

HRBPs supporting a CIO should know about IT professional associations, technology standards, and even IT maturity models.

HRBPs supporting Legal should learn about their function, professional standards, accreditations, and continuing professional education requirements.

Some interviewees asked their BPs permission to attend their staff meetings. Attendance is a sound way to learn about your BPs' environments, and it gives you the unique opportunity to contribute to the meeting's discussion. Sometimes, when you want a seat at the table, you have to ask for it!

Business diagnostics

Diagnostics is a way to identify problems within a system. In orthopedics, doctors examine skeletal x-rays for damage and mentally compare what they observe to healthy skeletal x-rays.

Medical professions are known for their diagnostic capabilities. Like them, you also can use diagnostics to solve problems.

HRBPs can develop their own organizational diagnostics by learning how healthy organizations function and common organizational problems. For example, you could learn about Rummler and Brache's Six Fundamental Laws of Organizational Systems. Knowing these can help you identify problems that may not be apparent to BPs.

Another way for you to develop diagnostics is by learning about the field of Human Performance Technology or HPT.

Human Performance is the valued results that have been produced by people who work within a system.

Technology is the systematic application of science for practical purposes.

HPT involves methods and procedures for solving problems or realizing opportunities, which you can use to analyze how people perform individually, in teams, in departments, or at the enterprise level. You even can align performance to business results to identify gaps.

HRBPs who are HPT practitioners can more effectively diagnose problems and support BPs.

Success Factor #3

Communicate and Empathize

Getting to the table is one thing, but earning your keep is another. To be valued by BPs and sit at their table, you have to add value in several ways. Not only do you need to learn table etiquette, but you also need to give something that BPs need—something that they normally wouldn't have. Effective HRBPs have that something.

Communicate and Empathize may seem straightforward, but there are specific things you need to do that aren't obvious or well-practiced by HRBPs.

Become a detective

You need to know your BPs' strengths, weaknesses, and business problems. Over time, you monitor how these change.

As part of your investigation, you want to discover the language that resonates with BPs. You use their language to explain HR policies and procedures in ways they can understand.

Successful HRBPs discover what is meaningful to BPs. To do this, you probe to get at BPs' intent. When BPs say that they wish their people would perform better at a task, such as project management, find out why. Ask why they aren't better already and what barriers prevent them from performing to expectation? Don't assume.

When you dig for answers, BPs take notice. BPs sense something different and begin to value how HRBPs strive to uncover answers that may be unconscious to the BPs.

Reflect on these

“What’s it like to be you?’ ‘What is it like to be you with your company?’ ‘With your leaders?’ ‘With your coworkers?’ ‘With your customers?’ ‘With your family?’ To get it right, HRBPs need to be comfortable with the uncomfortable and be prepared to hear the answers to those questions.”

Genuine empathy

“Without vulnerability or humility, you cannot experience genuine empathy, the cornerstones of building lasting, fruitful, fulfilling, and effective relationships with your BPs.”

Empathize with intent

Successful HRBPs acknowledge where BPs are developmentally. You want to understand their strengths, weaknesses, and business challenges.

From your discussions with BPs, you want to explain their perspective to show understanding. Doing so does three things:

1. It allows for BPs to validate what you know and correct your perspective.
2. It shows your investment in learning the business.
3. It creates an opening for you to contribute.

Interviewees explained that doing these enables you to become the BPs' sounding board.

Another way to empathize is to use language that resonates with BPs. As stated earlier, you learn their language through your detective work. Using the BPs' language rather than HR-speak builds connections and builds trust!

Guide your BPs

Interviewees explained that they help their BPs navigate through HR policies and processes. However, they don't allow themselves to work transactionally or lose their strategic positioning, and neither should you. You educate BPs to self-serve in appropriate ways.

One interviewee warned to avoid accepting unnecessary tasks just to please your BPs. You wouldn't want BPs to perceive you as an order-taker or a career level below them. Your goal is to become an equal partner who enlightens and guides them as they make business decisions.

Putting it together: what detective work, empathy, and guidance gets you

If you diligently seek deeper explanations, you become more effective using empathy. This, in turn, enables you to provide better guidance and coaching.

In other words, you'll have something to offer and say to BPs that will help them lead their business unit (or department) more effectively. Your BPs will value you!

One more thing...

The interviewees made a vital point: To be effective, you need to work diligently, not passively. You do this by learning the business, developing your capabilities, and taking the initiative.

Being an HRBP isn't a passive or reactive role where you wait for BPs to come to you. The best know that they need to work proactively with BPs. They do the following:

- Monitor the enterprise.
- Alert BPs about enterprise and strategic changes that affect them.
- Network with colleagues and learn from them.
- Coach and challenge BPs with valuable feedback.

Having the HRBP title is one thing. Doing serious work is entirely different. The latter drives results.

Success Factor #4

Focus on Results

Too often, BPs present tactical requests without clearly communicating the intended outcome. In some cases, BPs haven't considered the desired outcome as thoroughly as they should.

When BPs make tactical requests, focus on the desired results. Once the results is clearly stated, then consider what it will take to get there and how you will measure progress.

Another way to help BPs is to align business goals with the needed performance. You should ask, what workforce performance is needed to achieve business goals? While the question is simple, HRBPs don't leverage it as often as they should.

One interviewee recommends balancing business needs with costs. Trying to achieve a level of performance may not be possible when BPs minimize costs.

A mistake that BPs and HRBPs make is not leveraging enough interventions to achieve the desired results. Training, for example, may be necessary to make a change, but training alone might not be sufficient. Much of the time, change is complex and requires developing additional resources, revised expectations and feedback, modified incentives, and a different level of motivation from the workforce.

So, when BPs want to make organizational changes, reframe the request to focus on the desired results. Analyze more than the BP did, determine the interventions, select your metrics, and monitor progress.

"Understand the impact of timing of rolling out and executing HR projects and initiatives."

"Think in terms of value and maximizing investment versus minimizing costs. Teach others to look at costs outside of dollars and how dollars of productivity can be lost when taking the least expensive route."

"Learn metrics to measure desired outcomes such as retention, job satisfaction, participation, talent development."

"Push back with alternatives and negotiable solutions that minimize risk and accomplish the business objective."

"Use a data-driven approach when able."

"Sometimes, HRBPs need to flex on their position. The risk is not always greater than the reward."

Success Factor #5

Add Value and Build Trust

Interviewees expressed that the way to build credibility and trust is by delivering solutions and providing help. That is, show your value through your actions and contributions.

One way to do this is to deliver small wins rather than focusing on large ones. Some interviewees describe this as going for low-hanging fruit or looking for solid hits rather than home runs.

Another way to build trust is by being responsive to your BPs. You acknowledge requests immediately and respond appropriately.

Building trust happens by consistently performing and making contributions to enable BPs to achieve their business goals. You need to bring your HR perspective to the table and give BPs insight into their business unit's circumstances.

Profitability

*"Quantify contributions. Examples: 'I saved \$400k in recruiting costs.'
'Streamlining that policy saved the company \$75k.'"*

"At the end of the day, a company exists for one reason: to be profitable. From an HR perspective, a company exists to add value through desired products and services and take care of its people. Both are right, but with one caveat: those things are what a company does, but not why it exists. Knowing that distinction will serve any HRBP well when developing, communicating, and executing solutions that move the business forward. Without profitability, there cannot be a business. The focus must simultaneously meet the operational, financial, shareholder, customer, and employee needs."

Responsiveness to build trust

"If you respond immediately, be careful not to create unattainable expectations in the long run. Create boundaries and manage BP expectations. Responsiveness and accessibility are not mutually exclusive."

Success Factor #6

Improve through Feedback

You cannot get better without feedback and follow-up. Frequently ask for feedback about how you are contributing from BPs, your manager, colleagues, and other stakeholders.

One simple technique is to let people know that you are trying to improve. Once you have identified one or two things you want to change, let people know what they are. As you modify your behavior, follow up: ask how you're doing. Once people take seriously how you are trying to improve, they'll offer more support.

One technique you might try is called Feedforward. Marshall Goldsmith developed this as an alternative to regular feedback. Professionals who used it have reported to Goldsmith that the technique is more positive than other forms of feedback.

"Engage an executive coach or a mentor outside of your immediate span of influence."

"Be insatiably curious about everything. It's essential to constantly evolve, develop, and learn. Strong self-awareness is the lifeblood of improving through feedback. If we ask for performance feedback, that feedback is the respondent's reality. Like it or not, it's how they experience us."

"Asking for feedback is not always practical. BPs tend to give only positive feedback. Mid-level managers are typically the most critical and honest about challenges and HR gaps."

"Leverage data and measures of success. Ask, 'Did that HR initiative accomplish what you thought it would? Why or why not?' After-action reviews are critical to learning and growing as HRBPs."

Success Factor #7

Work Differently

To be effective as an HRBP, you need to work differently and think differently. You need to develop your systems thinking capabilities.

Being conservative or working within your comfort zone limits your contributions. You need to make bold decisions and take calculated risks.

To do this, you need to learn continuously about developing partnerships, leadership, and performance improvement. In the references, there are suggested readings that can help.

“Think differently. Expand your professional network to other disciplines and industries. Participate in Chamber of Commerce or industry professional organizations.”

Four Reflections about 7SF

Framing 7SF

If you carefully think about the seven success factors (7SF), you may note that some SFs complement others. Also, certain ones enable other ones. Consider this:

(1) Seek Support, (2) Learn the Business, and (3) Improve through Feedback are means for strengthening (3) Communicate and Empathize, (4) Focus on Results, and (7) Work Differently. When you accomplish (or continue to accomplish) 3, 4, and 7, you (5) Add Value and Build Trust.

Framing this another way:

1, 2, 6 enable

3, 4, & 7 which

results in 5.

Implementing 7SF

Over time, you need to integrate 7SF into your daily work practices. Implementing 7SF has to be done deliberately with thoughtful planning and scheduling.

Otherwise, like most HRBPs, you will fail to find the time to leverage them and may soon forget that they exist.

Implementing 7SF is not a natural process and will push you outside your comfort zone. For example, if you are not mathematically inclined and chose a career in HR over Finance to avoid spreadsheets and complex calculations, learning the financial metrics can be challenging. However, doing so will enable you to connect with your BPs in ways they probably wouldn't imagine!

If you are serious about implementing 7SF as a deliberate part of your work, you'll begin internalizing 7SF and find ways to uniquely practice 7FS. The technical aspects become more manageable, and you will gain unexpected insights into the business and how to support your BPs.

As noted in the first reflection, 7SF has a built-in development guide (1, 2, and 6) that will strengthen how you implement 3, 4, and 7, which naturally enables you to add value and build trust.

Alignment with Bucalo's 4 Steps

In the HR Exchange Network, Jack Bucalo has several published articles about HR and leadership. In his article, *Becoming a More Effective HR Business Partner*, Bucalo shares four steps for becoming a more effective HRBP. His four steps align with 7SF, emphasizing 2, 4, and 5.

Roughly paraphrasing, here are his four steps:

1. Learn the business-related matters, including at the enterprise level and with the business functions you support. In this step, your intent is to determine how HR can directly contribute to them.
2. Learn your organization's financial, operating, and strategic aspects of the business. Again, this applies to the enterprise level and the business functions you support. For Steps 1 and 2, you need to learn how the business functions align to the enterprise level.

Bucalo identifies the categories you should focus on and the data cycles (usually compiled for each fiscal year). His categories are financial, sales/revenue, R&D and product development, manufacturing, and strategic planning. Bucalo shares examples for each one.

3. Learn the financial, operating, and strategic business objectives for the enterprise and for each BP. For a given fiscal year, what have they committed to achieving? In the article, Bucalo shares examples of the different objective types.
4. In collaboration with your BPs, determine and implement HR projects that directly support the three types of business objectives. Because HR has responsibilities for enabling the workforce, your focus will be on enabling the performance of the BPs' workforce. This includes learning and non-learning interventions. In the article, Bucalo offers examples of the three objective types.

Who Has the Data?

In organizations—especially large ones—several people collect metrics. Every business unit has data. Your task is to identify these employees and regularly obtain their data. In HRBP workshops, too many complain that they don't have access. When asked to clarify, they enviously admit that they haven't tried to take the initiative to search for these experts.

Alternative Ways

"If all we do is apply conventional HR wisdom to modern problems, we're in trouble! The key to success is understanding the world around us. It's our compass to alternative ways of serving our customers and leading a company to invigorating and sustainable change."

Think Differently

"Critical thinking, outside the box thinking, conceptual thinking, systems thinking are all critical."

Managing HRBP Teams

To effectively lead an HRBP team, you need to find ways to help them become more relevant to the BPs they serve. This means developing and coaching them to increase their HRBP skillset and internalize the qualities.

As a manager, your team may not be as experienced. Many struggle to balance their transactional, tactical, and strategic work. Some may not understand how the three differ.

Strategic work is the most challenging part of the HRBP function and can be an HRBP's least comfortable. You may discover that your team tends to spend too much time focusing on transactional and tactical work. They can quickly become overwhelmed with managing CoE projects and neglect their strategic responsibilities. That is where you come in to coach them on balancing the three types of work.

More from the Interviewees

"Consistently share with the HRBP team what's going on in the business and the why behind decision-making. Doing so builds business acumen."

"The hardest part of managing an HRBP team is keeping them on the same page with the expectations of routines, so everyone is delivering a consistent HR service and employee experience across locations and functions."

"Hire HRBPs who are better than you, more intelligent than you, and have expertise that you don't. That's the best advice I received in a leadership training class."

"Always include the business in hiring decisions. Believe it or not, this happens way more than you might think."

"I like to showcase their talents and learn from them. They often teach me, and I love that."

"Teach HRBPs root-cause analysis, job mapping (systems strategy), and other tools to enable them to transition from transactional to strategic."

"Someone once believed in me, even when I wasn't ready. Today, I feel obligated to give the same gift to my HRBP team. Doing so pays the way forward."

"Provide opportunities for HRBPs to gain visibility and demonstrate their skills to executives, BPs, and employees. Put their capabilities into action."

About the Interviewees

The following three topics describe the interviewees' background. I asked them how they ended up in HR, learned about the field (developed their HR knowledge and skills), and learned their HRBP role.

Transition into HR

The career paths of the interviewees are diverse. The theme is that most did not start their academics or career planning to work in HR.

The minority followed a traditional path by completing a graduate degree at a university. Those interviewees didn't start their academics with plans to enter HR. For one interviewee, a college advisor suggested the idea.

Some started their career working in a company's business side, such as operations and finance.

A couple of interviewees discovered HR when asked to facilitate some courses for the training department. From the trainer role, they eventually transitioned to an HR generalist role.

Another worked in operations but wanted to give recruiting a try. He then became an HRBP.

One started in an administrative role in an HR department. Because of that experience, she eventually became an HR generalist and then an HRBP.

"I majored in Psychology and Business, the perfect blend for HR, but I didn't know that's what I wanted to do, even though a college advisor had suggested it (I thought she was crazy)."

"I had multiple non-HR jobs. In one of them, I was standing over the fax machine (to date myself) and struck a conversation with a coworker I didn't know well. She told me what she had done, and my eyes lit up. Within half an hour of that conversation, I downloaded graduate school HR applications. I don't know why I didn't see it before, but I never looked back after that point. I went to grad school and then started working in HR."

"My path to HR was not intentional. My original plan was to work in marketing. I earned my living as a self-employed consultant for nonprofits and corporate trainer while raising my family for many years. HR came when a colleague offered me a "real job" as an HR consultant with her company. That job led to my being recruited by another company in the same capacity. Along the way, I earned the SHRM-SCP designation."

"My path was nontraditional. I started in operations managing P&Ls. I then trained new operators. That ultimately led to me finding a new vocation in HR."

"I started as an Admin Assistant within an HR department and developed a curiosity about the function. When I finished my undergraduate degree in Business Management, I pursued an HR career."

Learning about HR

Interviewees increased their HR knowledge and skills in traditional and nontraditional ways.

Traditionally, they attended professional meetings, stayed current with changes in the law, and earned credentials from SHRM and HRCI.

None thought credentials are necessary or the primary source of their education. Credentials helped them reflect upon their role and the HR function. They thought of the credentialing process as a learning refresher that helped fine-tune how they work within HR.

Some advised gaining experience working in the different HR functional areas such as benefits, compensation, L&D, and talent acquisition. One learned about how different positions worked by job shadowing.

Some hired interns and didn't assign them transactional work. Instead, they gave them projects to build their experience while giving them some insight. In other words, the HRBPs wanted to learn from the interns and give them meaningful experiences.

Interviewees spent time learning how HR serves the business. College programs don't explain the reality of HR and don't explain how HR should contribute and even challenge the business.

Probably the most substantial advice interviewees offered is for you to learn how the business works. Build your business intelligence and acumen. One way of doing this is by gaining exposure to careers in the organization's industry rather than the HR roles.

“HR professionals must know about the industry, the competitors, regulations, and the impact of doing business. Also, HR professionals need to know the internal factors such as strategy, value drivers, go-to-market plans, measures of success, KPIs, and key financials. Knowing these enables HR professionals to be effective and credible by delivering business-aligned HR services and solutions.”

“I teach that every basis point of profit or loss has a behavior tied to it. Great HR professionals understand those connections and create valuable solutions to enhance the positive basis points and minimize the negative ones. That’s where I’d start: learn how the business makes money, the throughput of cash, the business cycles, and the key behaviors required for strategy realization. From there, I’d build foundational capability in the generalist and CoE arenas, then pair a leader with Strategy and Marketing (specifically brand management), followed by Internal Communications and PR. Understanding those arenas is a must for building relevant talent plans.”

“Mentor and engage staff who want to learn HR by providing them with opportunities to learn the business through experience.”

Learning the HRBP Role

In addition to learning about HR, interviewees explained how they learned their HRBP role.

Not surprisingly, most learned on the job. Some of it was trial-and-error learning. One interviewee explained that she didn't learn the role through formal training or reading manuals. Another, though, researched the role on her own.

Most explained that they learned the function from their HR mentors and peers.

Critical to developing as an HRBP is learning the parts of the business. That includes perceiving the business as a complex system.

Two interviewees expressed that you should learn the business' strategic levers:

- P&L
- How the business makes money
- Budgets
- Project planning and execution

One way to learn about the business and network at the same time is to volunteer to be on cross-functional projects. One interviewee found that he gained exposure to executives in a way that never would have occurred without volunteering for those types of projects.

As mentioned in the previous topic, interviewees found that certifications can help you reflect and rethink the fundamentals, but they are not differentiators. Interviewees found certifications to be more of a check-the-box milestone and a confidence builder.

“My learning came first from my career in operations managing the day-to-day HR requirements and needs. It came through an unexpected immersion into the HRBP role directly from a leadership development instructional design and facilitation role. I knew people, our company, and I knew enough about HR to be dangerous, but I wasn’t competent enough to serve as a strategic HRBP. That learning came in the streets and on the fly.”

“I found myself immersed amongst bright minds, willing mentors, and empathetic BPs who taught me what mattered to them. I leveraged my functional knowledge to form what is today my M.O. The way I learned had a dramatic impact on what I learned and how I learned to serve.”

“HRBPs benefit from rotations into specialty areas. So much of it is intermingled. Having these specialty experiences enables HRBPs to be a connector. Specialists know about budgets, influence, project planning, project execution, and alignment. All are essential HRBP skills. Also, trained specialists make excellent HRBPs.”

“Certifications are good to have, but they are not the end-all.”

“HRBPs can learn more perspectives from a broader range of colleagues by volunteering for cross-functional projects.”

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About the Author

I help you, your teams, and your departments build your leadership capabilities through consulting, keynotes, podcasts, and publications. With more than 20 years of practitioner and academic experience in the fields of Performance Improvement, Human Resources, and Talent Development, I share what I've learned with thousands of practitioners.

Practitioner Experience

I have served executives and teams in international and national organizations, including Lowe's Companies Inc., Ceridian Benefits Services, Fidelity Information Services, Johnson Controls Inc., and Arthur Andersen LLP. I held several formal roles, including Senior Manager of Training and Knowledge Management, Senior Instructional Designer, Performance Improvement Director, and Workforce Readiness Manager

Academic and Credentials

At the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, I completed my PhD and EdM through the Department of Educational Organization and Leadership. I completed my bachelor's degree in History and Philosophy from the University of Alabama at Birmingham. The International Society for Performance Improvement designated me a Certified Performance Technologist (CPT).

Speaker Experience

I have curated and shared my knowledge and experiences through keynotes and workshops for companies and at international and national conferences. I guest lectured at Notre Dame's Mendoza College of Business and presented to association chapters, including the International Society for Performance Improvement, the Association for Talent Development, and the Society for Technical Communication.

Publications

I have written three books, and one is forthcoming:

- Nine Practices of 21st Century Leadership: A Guide for Inspiring Creativity, Innovation and Engagement
- The Most Effective and Responsible Clinical Training Techniques in Medicine
- What the Heck Is Leadership and Why Should I Care?
- HRBP 3.0 (forthcoming)

Academic work

I am an Adjunct Professor at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. As part of the Learning, Design, and Technology Program in the Department of Educational Leadership, I teach graduate students leadership and management.

Forthcoming books by Gary A. DePaul, PhD

HRBP 3.0

Forthcoming in 2022!

Gary DePaul describes the HR challenges, the HRBP evolution, and how performance consulting can elevate your business contributions. He explains a methodology and process that management and HRBP consultants should know to successfully partner with the heads of lines of business, known as BPs.

Nine Practices of 21st Century Leadership

The Second Edition is Forthcoming in 2022!

It's time for someone to tell the story about how leadership is changing. Nine Practices of 21st Century Leadership tells this new and evolving leadership story.

- How leadership is changing
- The real purpose for practicing leadership (and it's not about inspiring others to accomplish stuff)
- The difference between leadership and management
- The best practices of leadership

"I answer these questions and more. May you find this book worthwhile and as enjoyable as it was for me to write!"

— Gary DePaul

More Books

What the Heck Is Leadership and Why Should I Care?

With more than fifty personal stories, Gary DePaul explains:

- How leadership differs from management
- Traditional leadership thinking that can get you in trouble
- Seven guiding principles that can help you avoid wasted effort and save you time in connecting with others

The Most Effective and Responsible Clinical Training Techniques in Medicine

- Talent development professionals who train professionals to follow standard procedures can build the most effective interventions using the best instructional techniques.
- The foreword to the second edition by itself is worth reading!

HRBP Workshops

Handshaw, Inc. and Gary DePaul deliver two and three-day HRBP workshops. Each is tailored to your team's needs and involves careful planning to ensure that your team can use the tools and techniques to strengthen their BP partnerships.

Based on the Dana Robinson's evidence-based methodology, Gary and his colleagues work with HR departments to strengthen HRBPs' systemic thinking and business intelligence so they can deliver substantial business results!

For more information, contact Gary at:

gary@garyadepaul.com

Keynotes

Elevate How HRBPs Contribute to the Business

Connect with Your Lines of business

Regardless of the support department, professionals can learn from accomplished HRBPs. You can save time and avoid unnecessary effort by learning how HRBPs position themselves to become trusted partners of the business and make substantial strategic contributions.

Leadership in The New Normal

The concern is not only about the Great Resignation but also the Great Resentment

During the pandemic, many reevaluated their work and quit. What could be worse? How about those who stay, become bitter, and underperform.

The old way of managing doesn't work well in the new normal, and managers become frustrated. Instead of trial-and-error, Gary DePaul explains how to connect differently with your teams and strengthen performance.

Leadership Consulting

If you want to uncover the strengths and challenges facing your frontline and mid-level managers, Gary DePaul can help.

Using analysis and proven techniques, Gary systematically identifies business and performance gaps. The gaps usually involve faulty thinking and systemic barriers that make the right behaviors difficult and challenging. Employees deserve more, and so does your business!

With his help, you can leverage Gary's recommendations to remove barriers, mitigate performance challenges, and more effectively achieve business results.

Two Ways You Can Help

To support future research projects, purchase reports by Gary DePaul through Amazon for peers, stakeholders, and yourself. You can always download the PDF version for free (no email required).

If you are an HR professional in an organization and not an external consultant, sharing your insights can advance the HR body of knowledge. Whether through surveys or interviews, you can contribute to future research conducted by:

- Gary DePaul
- Gary's graduate students as part of their development

Express your interest by contacting Gary DePaul through LinkedIn or complete the online form:

<https://www.garyadepaul.com/Research-Inquiry>