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How HR Can Get Its Mojo Back, Be the culture architect

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Employee engagement and culture issues are the number one challenge companies face around the world. The data backs this up as eighty-seven percent of companies rate this issue as a high priority problem and fifty percent rate it urgent. Despite this acknowledgment, their readiness to address this issue has dropped by forty-three percent year over year. More alarming still is that approximately half the companies surveyed acknowledge their inability to create the desired culture in their organizations.

As the competitive landscape of business gets more complex, this is the frontier that must be addressed in the immediate future. If Human Resources doesn't rise to the challenge, it runs the risk of being marginalized, as outside consultants in conjunction with senior leadership tackle this head-on.

We believe that HR can and must be the trusted culture architect of organizations. They are ideally positioned to expand and leverage both relationships and knowledge. This means being a key partner at the table with senior leadership, driving the people-side of the business. This includes making work irresistible and great, attracting top talent, and unleashing potential. This is even more critical as greater numbers of Millennials enter the workforce and Boomers retire. Younger workers value an outstanding workplace that is more than benefits and rewards. This group of younger employees values synergy, purpose and the impact their corporation has on the world. This is what defines the culture of the organization. HR must catch the wave now or become irrelevant.

What can you do now to become a key player in your company's success? What levers allow you to create a truly great place to work that attracts and retains the best talent, while allowing for innovative and meaningful work?

Audit your current culture

A culture review creates a baseline as you go about assessing how your employees and the marketplace sees you. There are many tools available to help. One that we like was introduced to us in Tribal Leadership. The authors found that the highest performing organizational cultures consistently demonstrate two behavioral traits that are easy to observe: the language that people use ("we" vs "I") and the way people congregate when they work together (three or more versus typical one on one conversations.) We found this body of work to be very accessible while also having a lot of depth and reach; so much so that we became certified in the model.

Speak to your employees

Ask them what is working, not working and what needs to shift. Focus groups are a good way to read this collective mind. Just be prepared to share your results with them and empower them to be a part of the solution.

- Design the culture you want to create. Get input from senior leadership down to front-line staff. Engage, probe, co-create and test. This will help build alignment and commitment to the new culture.
- Develop an action plan for going from what you have to what you desire. Create groups of three or more to help you implement and own what's being built.
- Ensure that the organization's exterior components, such as their systems, procedures, structures, and methods, stay aligned with the upgrades taking place in the interior components such as their culture, values, beliefs. The online retailer Zappos, for example, has a hiring process strongly centered on the culture it has built.
- Be rigorous in your measurement so you can celebrate and communicate as you all achieve milestones.

Creating a great place to work that attracts and retains the best and brightest need not be difficult. It takes commitment, leadership and people knowledgeable in this type of work. HR needs to refresh their toolbox and remain a respected partner capable of guiding this new frontier.

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Resources

Deloitte's 2015 Global Human Capital Trends survey

Tribal Leadership: Leveraging Natural Groups to Build a Thriving Organization. New York: Collins, 2008. Print.

See how Griffin Hospital in Derby, CT accomplished this. It's described in Chapter 2 of the book Tribal Leadership.

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