

Leading with People-First in Mind: Putting the “H” in ROI

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

WITH THE SUMMER 2018 ISSUE OF *PEOPLETALK* emphasizing the many ways technology can help to free up HR professionals' time and mind space, it is well worth continuing to explore the growing areas of practice and principle that can infuse further value into the expanding role of HR.

People-First (and Always)

What does placing people first as a guiding principle in HR look like?

It can make a difference in many aspects of work life. For example, consider a vignette moment when an HR professional must deliver bad news to employees after hearing it said rather hastily by the CEO. Positions are eliminated at one time or another in just about every company these days, which historically places the HR pro in the difficult position of being that messenger of bad news. How that news is delivered impacts widely in any organization and too often to ill effect—without having a people-first mindset and plan in place.

While providing career coaching and consulting services in the corporate sector, I have heard many of my clients say they have been “given the news” in a neutral, non-blaming, sometimes supportive way that helps to counter the shock, somewhat. Other clients have shared that they were informed of the termination in a formal, harsh or detached tone, devoid of empathy. When employees are advised in that manner, they are naturally likely to struggle and may get stuck in a self-blaming loop repeatedly wondering what they have done to “deserve” this.

Conversely, when the business decision is explained with transparency, genuine care and sincere thankfulness, it renders the decision more digestible and less likely to be taken personally. Even as the employee might be shocked or angry, communicating with utmost empathy and respect makes a significant difference in the way the employee gets through the grieving process and moves forward. Better still, backed by some career transition coaching and support, this experience can positively influence how the departing employee engages the landscape of new possibilities—as well as those remaining within the organization.

ROI: Bringing the HR Voice

Likewise, by casting a strong influence upwards in the board room whenever possible, HR professionals can help to bridge the gap between the workplace reality and the upper echelons of the organization. In order to contribute and turn up the volume of their voice, HR pros need only to access their next level of personal and professional confidence as they create confluence between the streams of people, managers and the CEO. By keeping people first in the continuum of corporate discussions, HR also can help expand and then explain the expanded nature of the bottom line, supported by a desire for retaining talent grounded in fostering culture, corporate social responsibility and a greater sense of community. Herein the triple bottom line both buoys and protects the ROI of the organization's most valuable assets—the people.

“HR can help expand and then explain the expanded nature of the bottom line.”

Bridging the HR Barriers

Admittedly, there are challenges, ranging from budgets to antiquated views of HR's purview to the gender predominance that still prevails in most boardrooms versus the gender predominance of HR professionals. These imbalances can temper the level of influence that a strong HR voice can have. Awareness of this can be part of the antidote, to push through with confidence and not let the budgets and biases get in the way of progressive thinking to be applied and turned into results.

After all, this is the path of profit fuelled by people-first thinking and it is swiftly growing from a path to a thoroughfare in a competitive marketplace. Put simply, progressive businesses that integrate that triple bottom line do find a better ROI overall, given that consumers tend to favour such companies—and employees want to work for them.

Having just collectively gone through a bout of poor air quality in the province resulting from forest fires, we can all share experiential understanding of the “common good” such as air and water, that we all depend on. Doing what we can to protect it, individually and collectively, is another important, timely part of that trio of core values we can embrace at work and in life.

Coaching Expands in HR

With increasing research showing the positive ROI of coaching, more and more businesses are hiring coaches as employees or on a contract basis. At the same time, coaching is now part of the extensive CPHR list of core competencies. What if CPHRs were to further integrate this practice as part of their expanded role to help create a coaching culture in their organization?

Reminding ourselves of the research on ROI of coaching as provided by Donna Howes, CPHR in the Spring 2017 *PeopleTalk*—and brought home in this issue with Howie Outerbridge's case study of Automotive Fuel Cell Corporation's experience—the numbers are significant, showing increases in productivity, work performance and team effectiveness, among the benefits.

Howes quoted Clutterbuck, Megginson and Bajer for their definition of a coaching culture as being one in which “the principles, beliefs and mindsets driving people's behavior in the workplace are deeply rooted in the discipline of coaching.”

Activating HR's Power

Regarding mindsets, in his book *Activate Your Power*, author and president of Dynamic Achievement Group, Eitan Sharir, shares numerous ways to grow positive mindsets to improve interpersonal communications, performance at work and even our health and wellness. Providing simple, self-coaching steps, Sharir provides the processes needed to shift our mindset from the small to big picture outlook—and successfully navigate the daily life of an HR professional.

Case in point, you observe a conflict or incident at work that would normally trigger a negative reaction in you. Rather than typically reacting to the trigger in auto-pilot, Sharir suggests three simple steps:

- **Be alert** to what happens around you while asking yourself how to respond, rather than just react.
- **Acknowledge the negative stimulus** in what occurred, to create a pause or gap between it and your mind which

enables you to choose your response rather than merely react impulsively; and

- **Identify and be aware of the meaning** or interpretation of the event you created in your mind, seeing it and adjusting its meaning in relation to the greater perspective of what truly matters and your purpose in relation to it.

The Silent “H” of ROI

While these steps might not solve every problem, they are intrinsic to HR's ability to attain and champion the people-first focus within an organization. While conflicts, like bad news, will inevitably occur, how they are perceived and received is largely determinate of an organization's culture, which certainly puts a silent “H” into the ROI acronym.

Imagine a workplace in which this self-coaching process becomes integrated in people's way of interacting with their social environment. The positive ripple effect would help counter the tendency to overreact, blame and engage in dysfunctional behaviours that, over time, create toxicity and exhaustion in a workplace environment.

Likewise, during performance reviews, fostering self-responsibility and self-awareness should become an important part of making it effective and impactful. Using coaching language and asking strong, insight-generating questions can also help employees to set new ambitious goals to keep learning and growing. Supporting, coaching and providing accountability for these goals can only generate further engagement and increased productivity—all of which maintains a good momentum and strengthens the current of a strong ROI carried by the people-first principle. **P**

Professional speaker, author and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients two decades of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions.



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