

HR & TALENT ADVISORY

Critical Differentiators of Top HR Business Partners

The HRBP (R)Evolution Whitepaper
Series: Part I

KINCENTRIC A Spencer Stuart Company

The HR Business Partner (HRBP) role has been around in concept since the 1990s, when Dave Ulrich published his seminal book, *Human Resource Champions*.¹ Since then, many organizations continue to examine this role and strive to fully realize its business value. Kincentric has also spoken about the role's potential and the desired outcomes in their *NeXt HR Operating Model*.²

In the past year, HRBPs have been thrust into the forefront of business leadership, making it clear that an HR Business Partner (R)Evolution is on the rise. Given the criticality of the role and its business impact, we wondered, for those who have risen to the challenge, what has led to their ascension and set them apart?



To find out, Kincentric interviewed leading HRBPs across the globe and found that six key differentiators set successful HRBPs apart from others. Some pertain to how the HRBP defines their role; all pertain to a laser focus on business needs. This is the focus of the first article in a three-part whitepaper series.³

Differentiator #1: Effectively Serving as a Coach to Business Leaders

"The role of the HRBP has evolved to be less of an HR role and more of a holistic business coach on all things talent."
—J. Michael Lane (University of California, San Francisco)

The ability to serve as a coach has become the hallmark of top HRBPs. A strong HRBP can coach business leaders on their individual leadership effectiveness and how they drive solutions for the business. This requires the ability to challenge the leader's perception, refocusing away from problems to desired solutions. As one HRBP put it, *"It includes listening and holding up a mirror to executives and helping the leader articulate the unarticulated."* A top HRBP needs to have the confidence to ask questions that they may not always have the answer to, with a posture of openness and a sense of curiosity. The value comes in asking questions that help leaders think differently.

As several top HRBPs emphasized, there is a difference between coaching and telling. The HRBP needs to listen, be strategic in their response and help the leader understand the implications of their decisions. *"As a coach, you must serve as an advisor versus someone who just tells others what to do and risks being seen as a 'teller'."* And as one HRBP aptly shared, *"If HR gets back to being a decision maker, we are regressing, and we become the police."*

Coaching a leader to improve personal performance or to understand the challenges that are impeding organizational progress can add significant value. As one top HRBP put it, *"If you do it right you will have a cascading impact on everyone in the organization and establish the expectation that leaders are coaches for their teams—this is the best way to unleash potential."*

1. Dave Ulrich, *Human Resource Champions: The Next Agenda for Adding Value and Delivering Results*, 1997

2. Kincentric, "Next HR," 2020

3. Part 1: The Ascent of the HR Business Partner—Critical Differentiators of Top HRBPs
Part 2: Preparing to Rise Up—How HR Business Partners Can Navigate Their Career and Position Themselves for Success
Part 3: Realizing The Value—How CHROs Implement and Evolve the HR Business Partner Function to Maximize Business Impact

Differentiator #2: Seeing Themselves as Business Leaders First, HR Professionals Second

"When I'm sitting around the Leadership Team table, my peers from other functions are looking for me to have a perspective on the business, not just the people."

—**Kristen McQuaid (Biogen)**

The successful HRBP no longer sees themselves as just a partner, but as someone who is part of the business. While this does not negate their HR expertise, it does require them to think differently about how they apply that expertise to drive business outcomes. As one HRBP put it, *"You are a business leader first and your HR experience is only one lever you use to support the business."*

To effectively perform in the role, top HRBPs not only understand the business but also see themselves as leaders whose success is fully intertwined with the success of the business. They understand the changing dynamics of the business, how it works and the implication of that change on the talent as well as the business. Armed with this knowledge, they come to the table with solutions that drive impact. Doing this effectively requires the HRBP to build credibility with leaders so that they are not just viewed as the "HR person" in the room. It requires them to be clear with leaders on the purpose of their role and demonstrate the value they bring. This is what earns them a seat at the table.

While this might seem like a subtle shift in mentality for HRBPs, it is one that can be difficult to make as it requires the HRBP to understand how to effectively strike a balance between their HR and business perspectives. As one leader told us, *"HRBPs get lost in the pedagogy of something or in the validation of a particular tool vs. the practicality and application of the tool."* Another leader we spoke to gave this piece of advice to future HRBPs: *"Do not be all 'HR' in your approach, forcing supposed HR best practice down their throats, all the while thinking that this is what the business should do because you're right."*

Differentiator #3: Being the Connector Between the Business and HR

"The masterful HRBP knows how to connect and, ultimately, close the gap between business needs and HR solutions."

—**Robert Micera (United Health Services)**

While top HRBPs consider themselves "business first," they also play the unique role of being the bridge between the business and the "rest of HR." They need to translate business needs to inform development of integrated people solutions that drive talent and business outcomes.

Doing this well requires the HRBP to not only be embedded in the business but also have a close partnership with HR COEs and HR Operations. In our conversations with HRBP leaders, the "rest of HR" emerged as one of the top three stakeholder groups with whom HRBPs need to build and sustain relationships. As one HRBP leader said, *"HRBPs must not underestimate the importance of building relationships with their HR peers and partners."*

The HRBP also needs to effectively direct business leaders to the right resources in HR when needed. While they serve as strategic advisors to leaders, they are not the experts in all things HR and need to be comfortable and, even more so, confident with that fact. As one top HRBP told us, *"You have to rely on your partners...connecting the right people together is way more important than handling the issue yourself."*

This is not an easy role to play and requires the top HRBP to maintain a careful balancing act between representing the needs of the various stakeholders they engage with—business leaders, employees and HR. One leader had an interesting analogy for this: *"It's a choreograph of several dances—two steps forward, one step back...a quick switch to a ballroom number, and then out of nowhere, you're doing a country line dance."* Ultimately, they need to focus on the best or right outcome for all.

Differentiator #4: Having Unparalleled Courage

“The ability to raise the things that no one else will raise is a differentiator between a great HRBP and a mediocre HRBP, where you are a mere order taker for the business.”

—Amy Smith (CDK Global, Inc.)

One element that was consistently mentioned as a critical differentiator for top HRBPs was their ability to demonstrate courage on an ongoing basis—courage to say “no,” courage to be direct and openly share their perspectives, courage to push leaders to make effective decisions, and courage to make decisions while dealing in the “gray.” As one HRBP put it, *“This is one of the top three skills that allows an HRBP to move from individual contributor to an HRBP leader.”*

The role of an HRBP is not to be an order taker. A successful HRBP needs to set the right expectations with their leaders on what they will and will not do and let go of the notion that being liked by their business leader is a measure of success. One top HRBP said it well: *“If I am worried about making a business leader happy all the time, I am not being true to myself or to the organization.”* Further, the HRBP needs to be comfortable asserting their opinion and sharing their perspectives to drive the right outcomes for the business. While they might not have all the answers, they need to be able to push their leaders’ thinking when needed.

It’s not always easy to build this courage but an HRBP needs to start somewhere. The foundation to doing this well is in establishing trust with your leader, so that they also understand that you have their best interests in mind. We like how one leader summarizes this point: *“It’s being the ‘Trusted Troublemaker’—you must be trusted, and you must show that you can be trusted. You can’t have courage if you haven’t first built the trust.”*

Differentiator #5: Modeling Agility and Flexibility

“Workplaces are dynamic environments, so you need to be comfortable with ambiguity, be creative and iterative with your solutions, learn and pivot.”

—Krisanne Pook (BASF)

The experiences of the past year have underscored the importance of being adaptable. From bringing in cross-functional teams to solve urgent business problems to reprioritizing the HR agenda (again and again), this is the new reality within which organizations operate.

One top HRBP described it as constantly balancing different priorities and getting comfortable with ambiguity. They shared: *“Nothing we do is yes or no anymore. In some functions it’s easier to be more black and white, but that’s not HR. I am very black and white about knowing there is a lot of gray, and recognize there is emotion, conflict and nuance in the gray. This helps me in being an HRBP, in terms of taking the emotion out and recognizing the facts and the implications of things.”*



In addition to rebalancing and managing within the gray, an HRBP’s approach to solutioning must be agile. Many HRBPs shared that you must be open-minded and start by listening and learning before jumping in to solve issues. Solutions must be grounded in an understanding of the business and employee needs. Recognize that one size does not fit all, and be prepared to learn and adapt.

Modeling agility and flexibility, the top HRBP helps the business transform the status quo and assists the organization to be nimbler and more adaptable—all while being in the midst of it. This has become the mandate for HRBPs.

Differentiator #6: Speaking Truth as an Inspiring Storyteller

"If we never incorporate data and insights into our message, how would we ever justify the value of HR? We are, in effect, not speaking the same language as the business!"

—Amanda Evans (Greene Tweed)

There is power in words. The ability to tell a good story that stirs and transforms hearts and minds has become a critical business skill, and the strong HRBP has mastered this. Keeping an ear to the ground, listening to the employee voice and using data to provide insights about the most critical talent needs is how HRBPs provide value to business leaders.

As one top business partner expressed: *"The voice of the employee is becoming stronger and more active with social media channels available everywhere. A company's values and culture are being tested on a regular basis. Companies and leaders are being more exposed and there is no safety net for companies anymore; they need to face*

direct feedback/criticism from employees, clients, board and investors. The HRBP's role is to help leaders understand the generational difference. It's our job to help them understand why this is important."

The most successful HRBPs cleverly create and tailor stories that resonate with the organization, its leadership and its people. As shared by one HRBP, *"To be convincing, your story cannot be just based on feelings and emotions. It's about data. It's about knowing your business and their circumstances. It's about people and understanding their needs. Put this all together and you will gain instant credibility. This is because we are speaking as a person from the business versus to the business."*

Through words and actions, the HRBP speaks truth, takes a stand and advocates for change that drives both revolution and evolution.

1
Effectively
Serving as
a Coach to
Business
Leaders

2
Seeing
Themselves
as Business
Leaders First, HR
Professionals
Second

3
Being the
Connector
Between the
Business and HR

HR Business Partners who demonstrated these six differentiators did so after long and varied careers in the business and HR. In our next article, we will explore how they navigated their career and development to gain the insights and skills required to operate at the top of their profession.

Differentiators

4
Having
Unparalleled
Courage

5
Modeling Agility
and Flexibility

6
Speaking Truth
as an Inspiring
Storyteller

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Contact us to talk about how we can help.

About Kincentric

Kincentric, a Spencer Stuart company, helps organizations unlock the power of people and teams to ignite change and drive better business results. With decades of experience and specialist expertise in areas such as culture; employee engagement; leadership assessment and development; HR and talent advisory; and diversity, equity and inclusion, we use data-driven insights to architect solutions that add value, enhance agility, and increase organizational effectiveness. For more information, visit kincentric.com.

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