

HR & TALENT ADVISORY

# Preparing to Rise Up: How HR Business Partners Can Navigate Their Career and Position Themselves for Success

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The HRBP (R)Evolution Whitepaper  
Series: Part II

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In mid-2021, Kincentric interviewed top-performing HRBPs from organizations around the world, resulting in a series of articles on the “HRBP (R)evolution. In our first [article](#) we identified six differentiators that set top HR Business Partners (HRBPs) apart. While we learned that there is no “right” career path to success, we found that certain pivotal moments were common among these top HRBPs. In our second article in the three-part series, we highlight six actions that we found important for an HRBP to take as they navigate their career and position themselves for success in the role. We also share some anecdotes of how these top HRBPs prepared to rise up to the challenge.

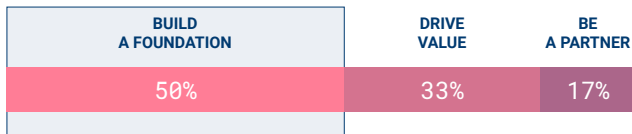


Through our discussions with these leading HRBPs and a brief survey, we explored topics such as: the responsibilities they are tasked with, key career experiences, critical HR knowledge areas and competencies, important stakeholder groups, emergent HRBP roles and capabilities, and the biggest obstacles they have faced to date. Taking their responses into account, we compiled and synthesized the data to determine the six actions that we deemed most essential for success in the HRBP role.

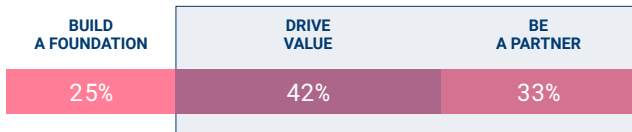
# Take Action #1: Know Where to Start

We asked leading HRBPs what best described their situation<sup>1</sup> as they entered their current role and where they are now:

**WHAT WAS THE CONTEXT FOR YOUR ROLE WHEN YOU ENTERED THE ORGANIZATION?**



**WHERE ARE YOU NOW?**



**How many years have passed from when you entered the role to where you are now?**

Years	%
< 1 year	22%
1 to 3 years	39%
3 to 5 years	13%
> 5 year	26%

Knowing the “HR maturity” of an organization as one comes into the HRBP role can make or break one’s success; the evolution along this spectrum can be a multi-year transformation journey.

1. **Build a Foundation:** The HRBP function is newly established or is being re-established, with a focus on building credibility in the organization. The business doesn’t yet understand the value that HRBP can provide.  
**Drive Value:** The HRBP has a seat at the table, but leadership requires they deliver more value. The HRBP is expected to solve critical talent issues and serve as a connector to other HR services. The HRBP function is being monitored closely for success.  
**Be a Partner:** The HRBP is operating as a strategic advisor to senior management. Leaders expect to have their HRBP by their side to provide advice and counsel around the most pressing people issues. Talent strategy, workforce planning, succession planning and identification of emerging talent needs are all the domain of the HRBP. The strategic value of the HRBP role is undisputed.

“Spend time learning the business. Read, learn, ask questions, take notes. Make sure that you can speak to the business you are supporting in a real and substantive way. If you can’t, you’ll never have credibility.”  
 – Kristen McQuaid (Biogen)

Each organization’s “HR maturity” is different and a strong HRBP never goes into a new organization and role blind—“don’t start the work without knowing who you are working with,” as one HRBP puts it. The strong HRBP always conducts thorough due diligence to deeply understand the organization—its people, its leadership, the perception of HR, and what the HRBP is being tasked with. Another HRBP summed this up rather well: “Come in, be curious and ask a lot of questions to get to know the business. With any new group that the HRBP works with, the business has to have confidence that the HRBP understands them and knows what’s needed.” This understanding informs what role the HRBP needs to play. Will they need to establish their credibility (Build a Foundation)? Will they need to strengthen HR connection (Drive Value)? Or will they need to provide strategic advice and thought leadership (Be a Partner)?

Only when the organizational context is understood does the strong HRBP start to do their work, meeting the organization where it’s at, doing the role asked of them and seeking alignment, but, at the same time, working at positioning themselves as an essential partner in order to provide the most value to their organization. That HRBP ultimately knows who their stakeholders are, where they need to be and what is needed to get there. Another HRBP shared this perspective: “Nothing frustrates people more than when they go to their HRBP and they get a solution that doesn’t resonate. Providing such a response shows a lack of knowing the organizational context and that’s not what a true HR Business Partner does!”

Finally, the strong HRBP knows that positioning oneself to provide maximum value often takes time and patience. Approximately 39% of the top HRBPs we surveyed said it took them 1–3 years from when they entered the role to get to where they are now, with another quarter (26%) saying it took them more than 5 years.

## Take Action #2: Translate Strategy to Talent Imperatives

We asked leading HRBPs to identify the critical HR knowledge areas they focus on both today and as they think about the future:

CURRENT		FUTURE	
Business & HR Strategy	83%	Business & HR Strategy	74%
Culture & Organizational Health	57%	Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	57%
Organization Effectiveness	52%	Workforce Transformation	52%
Talent Management	48%	HR & Data Analytics	52%
Diversity, Equity & Inclusion	35%	Organization Effectiveness	48%

Whether to meet current or future needs, it's clear that an HRBP must spend their time and effort on business-aligned HR priorities that deliver talent solutions that create the right "employee eXperience".

*The HRBP has to be able to understand the business strategy and build a talent plan that is aligned to driving that strategy.*

— Kathryn Perera (Moody's)

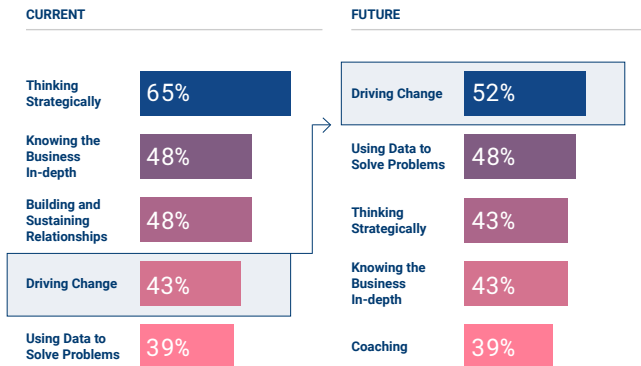
Aligning business and HR strategy has been and will always be a priority for the HRBP, with a majority of the people we surveyed—approximately 83% (current) and 74% (future)—stating it's one of their top HR knowledge areas. However, as we reviewed their other selections and probed deeper, we found that these HRBPs go beyond just aligning business and HR strategy. Ultimately, they translate this into a talent strategy and subsequent solutions that enable the right "employee eXperience." As one HRBP stated, "Rethinking the employee eXperience will become the most important skill set of all to maximize the potential of new generations, new workplaces and new concepts of organizational effectiveness." This focus makes perfect sense since talent is an organization's most critical resource. The strong HRBP, therefore, is the person at the table who is able to translate strategies into the right talent imperatives and is always mindful of employee eXperience consequences.

We also learned from our discussions with these HRBPs that having an "employee eXperience focus" requires a strong HRBP to be a servant leader.<sup>2</sup> This means they must know the needs of their talent by listening to the employee voice and understanding what moments truly matter for them. And as a servant leader, the HRBP adapts their talent solutions to meet employee needs—whether this manifests in driving diversity, equity and inclusion outcomes, preparing the workforce for the future of work, increasing organizational effectiveness or even fostering a healthy work culture (all of which were also called out as top HR knowledge areas of focus in our survey). Another HRBP gave this advice: "Focus on the employee eXperience to enable the business. At times, we in HR have a bad tendency of getting in our own way—making HR decisions and prioritizing HR actions that ultimately don't matter to the employee."

2. Servant leadership is a leadership philosophy in which the goal of the leader is to serve. This is different from traditional leadership, where the leader's main focus is the thriving of their company or organization. A servant leader shares power, puts the needs of the employees first and helps people develop and perform as highly as possible. Servant leadership inverts the norm, which puts the employee as a main priority.

## Take Action #3: Be a Vanguard of Change

We asked leading HRBPs to identify the critical competencies they focus on both today and as they think about the future:



The strong HRBP knows that change (and driving it) is constant and will continue to increase in importance; this requires demonstrating a level of leadership and adaptability unlike no other.

*Our profession is a science and not ‘a feel.’ The HRBP needs to know what’s changing and adapt.*  
— Sunny Sharma (PMI)

Most of the top HRBPs we spoke with brought up the importance of staying flexible to ever-changing circumstances. In fact, for many of them, being able to adapt to and manage change is a crucial competency that has helped them in their career. One HRBP said that *“resilience and change should go hand-in-hand for the HRBP.”* Another shared their point of view on this topic: *“Change management is not a prescriptive, one-size-fits-all approach, it is bigger and more complex than that. HRBPs must constantly, actively work at changing mindsets.”* It’s not surprising, therefore, that driving change was considered the #1 critical future competency among the top HRBPs we surveyed, moving from approximately 43% (current) to approximately 52% (future).

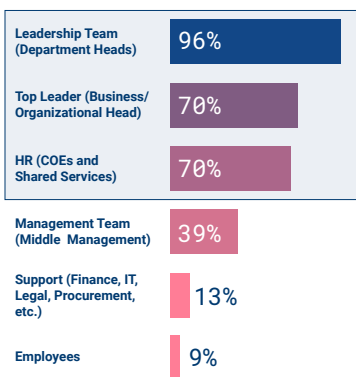
Another interesting commonality we found among leading HRBPs, on their journey to be “change adept,” was the fact that many of them took on rotational roles in HR and/or in the business during their career. A top HRBP pointed out that *“by taking on different roles within HR early in my career—including in the Centers of Expertise (COEs) and Shared Services—I was able to become a well-rounded HRBP.”* Another top HRBP intentionally took on a business operations role so that they could *“sit with the business, be one with them and learn their needs. That exposure set me up for success and was instrumental in building future credibility as their HRBP.”*

We’ve found that a strong HRBP knows that change is an unavoidable constant that should be prepared for. And ultimately, being prepared means not remaining static and taking on different experiences. A strong HRBP becomes competent and ready to drive change, becoming more nimble, adept and flexible in the process to be able to lead on the front lines. One HRBP summed it up like this: *“Getting the business and leaders on board to champion change requires role modeling, anchoring and reinforcing the right behaviors and mindset.”*

## Take Action #4: Intentionally Build and Maintain Relationships

We asked leading HRBPs to identify the most important relationships they have had to establish in their current role:

MOST IMPORTANT STAKEHOLDER GROUPS



To be able to navigate a diverse spectrum of stakeholders, the HRBP must selectively build and maintain relationships both across the business and within HR; ultimately, it is through these intentional connections that the HRBP establishes themselves and gets things done.

*You are only as good as your stakeholders, like business leaders. There isn't much you can do alone. If you don't manage your critical stakeholders well, your interventions and initiatives will look good on paper but might not bear any significant impact.*

— Atul Gaur (L'Oréal)

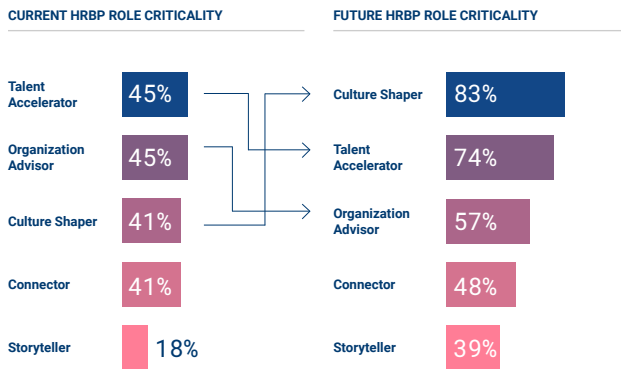
In our survey and discussions with top HRBPs, most cited top leaders, those leaders' direct team and HR (COEs and Shared Services) as their three most important stakeholder groups. This shows us that a strong HRBP must be very deliberate in building and maintaining relationships. As one top HRBP says, "You can't do anything unless you build relationships and have partnerships at the highest of levels. It's all about you building the trust to get things done." "If you are partnering from the top, you are in effect bringing along the rest of the organization," another top HRBP shared.

We've found that top HRBPs understand this intricate web of connection. They know how important it is to establish, navigate and maintain different relationships with a diverse set of stakeholders—whether they are from the business or the rest of HR, whether they are a leader or a peer or a subordinate, or whether they are an internal or external partner. A strong HRBP knows when and how to leverage connections from all sides, pulling the right strings at the right time to achieve the talent outcomes and subsequent business objectives they desire. One HRBP shared this perspective: "As the HRBP deepens their relationships across the organization and within the business, they, in turn, are creating greater impact across all aspects of HR. This is an important part of strategic HRBP work."

Being intentional about relationships, therefore, is an important means to an end. It is a tool for the HRBP to influence, inspire and lead others, and ultimately, accomplish what needs to be done. When this action is neglected, one top HRBP says, the human aspect of HR is forgotten and, in effect, an HRBP cannot provide the value they promise. They sum it all up by saying, "People you work with have to see YOU as a human. This requires building a relationship with them—for them to know that you are real and can get things accomplished, and that you're not a corporate head that just doles out information."

## Take Action #5: Be Agile in Your Approach

We asked leading HRBPs about emergent roles and subsequent capabilities they must personify as an HRBP and the criticality of each:



**Talent Accelerator:** Proactively identify current and future talent needs within the business and develop talent strategy to close gaps.

**Organization Advisor:** Consult with leaders on organization development and HR solutions that deliver business and people outcomes.

**Connector:** Translate business needs to inform development of integrated people solutions and provide guidance for navigating HR services and resources.

**Culture Shaper:** Advise leaders on strategies to cultivate an inclusive work environment, manage organizational change and foster an engaged and agile workforce to enable a positive employee experience.

**Storyteller:** Leverage data-driven insights to develop innovative solutions and craft coherent and compelling stories that drive decision-making and positive change for the business.

Whatever persona the HRBP is called to play today may not be the same one they are called to play in the future; the HRBP realizes this and must constantly adapt their role and capabilities to meet business demands.

*The HRBP must constantly shift to the situation at hand, having to ‘swap hats’ if you will. One day we are a partner, the other we are an enforcer. Agility, flexibility and comfort with ambiguity are essential traits to have.*

— Amanda Evans (Greene Tweed)

The top HRBPs we talked to unanimously shared that they have been dealing with higher degrees of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity (VUCA) of late, especially with all that has happened these last several years. One HRBP, in fact, believes that *“this is not going away and will only get worse.”* Another HRBP opined that *“greater transparency created by technology and social media has further disrupted the workplace.”*

Given the ever-increasing VUCA environment, these top HRBPs have learned to constantly pivot (revolve) and shift (evolve) to successfully navigate through these circumstances. This requires a high level of agility and flexibility from them. Furthermore, understanding the situation and the role one needs to play—and with that, demonstrating that role’s subsequent capabilities—at a given time has become a critical skill. Our survey results reflect that fact. Whatever persona the HRBP is called to play today may not be the same one they are called to play in the future. Does the HRBP need to transform the workforce, or do they need to manage change? Do they need to be a coach to the leadership, or do they need to advocate for the employee? Is it all of the above, all at once? A top HRBP shared their perspective of this conundrum: *“The HRBP has to be able to switch it up and continuously differentiate themselves to prove their effectiveness.”*

What we’ve learned is that the strong HRBP must always be in tune with the organizational pulse and the employee voice, then adapt their roles and capabilities to match the need. They cannot stick to one role and set of capabilities hoping that this tactic will work in any given situation (because it won’t). Another top HRBP stated it this way: *“The ‘HRBP pendulum’ will continue to swing, and this can be a scary thing for some to deal with. This requires that we remain agile and take an iterative approach in all that we do. Move forward even if it means taking small steps and adapting along the way.”*

## Take Action #6: Persist Through Challenges

We asked leading HRBPs about the top obstacles they have had to face in their current role that hindered their effectiveness:

### TOP BARRIERS



The challenges an HRBP faces will take different shapes and forms; but, regardless of the kind of challenge and how hard it may seem, one thing is true – top HRBPs persist through these by being better and becoming better.

*Don't be afraid to fail. Keep trying. You'll get there.*  
— Paula Ramirez (Boeing Credit Union)

Many of the top HRBPs we talked to revealed that being in the role can be challenging at times, with so many different barriers they need to overcome. Interestingly, what ran common among these HRBPs was not always the kind of obstacle faced, but rather the fact that they courageously chose to persist through them. One top HRBP said, *"You have to take chances. You must have the courage to make a decision. Do not be afraid of 'getting your hand slapped.' Manage through the risk."* Another top HRBP put it this way: *"Just make do with what you have and don't be paralyzed by limitations."*

What we learned in our discussions is that the strong HRBP is fully aware that their job is not easy and will be full of challenges and blind spots, but they don't let these deter them. Instead, they focus on building resilience—choosing to be better and become better. One day this may mean investing in developing one's skill sets; on another day, this may manifest in concentrating on self-care. One HRBP shared this account: *"With no one else to rely on, I often had to trust my own judgment. Trust your instincts and be confident in your skills and abilities. There is a reason you were put in the HRBP role."*

Furthermore, we also found that overcoming challenges and blind spots embolden the strong HRBP. These obstacles only serve to bolster their conviction in doing the best job that they possibly could, even if it meant stumbling along the way. *"I had to just get through it. I had to because that's my job,"* one HRBP defiantly said. Another HRBP shared, *"Sure, things sometimes didn't turn out the way I liked but, ultimately, we got to where we needed to be."*



Through our discussions with top HRBPs, we've learned the path of rising up to the challenge is an interesting one and unique to each individual. But we have also learned that despite the many paths available, the essential actions required for one to become a high-performing HRBP are relatively the same.

Another interesting insight we've found through our discussions is that no HRBP can ever be successful in an organization that does not support them and the value they can bring. In our next and final article, we will explore what CHROs must do to create an HRBP function that is "fit for purpose" and aligned with HR and business needs.



## Actions

- 1**  
**Know Where to Start**
- 2**  
**Translate Strategy to Talent Imperatives**
- 3**  
**Be a Vanguard of Change**
- 4**  
**Intentionally Build and Maintain Relationships**
- 5**  
**Be Agile in Your Approach**
- 6**  
**Persist Through Challenges**

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## 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](https://kincentric.com).

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