Straddling the Line or Embracing the Dichotomy: HR’s Role as an Employee Advocate as Necessary to Remaining (or Becoming) a Business Partner

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Abstract
[Excerpt] The HR function has evolved through the years (mostly in larger companies) from a purely clerical and employee relations nature to a function involved in developing organizational strategy and realizing business-wide goals. The evolution of the Australian nomenclature of the HR role clearly shows the transition that this function has experienced. In Australia people working in HR were called “welfare officers” in the early 1900s, referred to as “personnel managers” from the 1950s to the 1980s, and finally as “human resource managers” in the late 20th century. [i] The shift in titles also reflects an evolution of responsibilities and expectations of the role of HR. On one side is HR’s role as an employee advocate whose main goal is to safeguard the well-being of employees. On the other is HR as a strategic business partner who is to be primarily concerned with aligning the workforce with the business goals of the organization.

Keywords
HR Review, Human Resources, employee advocacy, strategic partnership

Disciplines
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Straddling the Line or Embracing the Dichotomy: HR’s Role as an Employee Advocate as Necessary to Remaining (or Becoming) a Business Partner

Maria Carolina Grillo

The HR function has evolved through the years (mostly in larger companies) from a purely clerical and employee relations nature to a function involved in developing organizational strategy and realizing business-wide goals. The evolution of the Australian nomenclature of the HR role clearly shows the transition that this function has experienced. In Australia people working in HR were called “welfare officers” in the early 1900s, referred to as “personnel managers” from the 1950s to the 1980s, and finally as “human resource managers” in the late 20th century. The shift in titles also reflects an evolution of responsibilities and expectations of the role of HR. On one side is HR’s role as an employee advocate whose main goal is to safeguard the well-being of employees. On the other is HR as a strategic business partner who is to be primarily concerned with aligning the workforce with the business goals of the organization.

Some see this dichotomy between “employee advocate” and “business partner” as being mutually exclusive, whereby advocating for employees will undermine HR’s goal of “having a seat at the table.” But these two roles do not have to be completely at odds. In fact, HR is at a uniquely special position through which it can, and must, seek to balance these two often self-interested forces (maximizing profits/more work for less pay vs. maximizing utility/more pay for less work). It is precisely this balancing act that will help HR to secure the longevity and stability of its organization as well as a mutually beneficial relationship between employer and employee. Thus, even though the HR function is increasingly called upon to be a business partner, it should never relent on its critical role as an employee advocate. It should balance and perform both roles to the extent that organizational objectives can be pursued without violating employee rights or eroding the employee value proposition (EVP). Furthermore, as a business partner the HR function must be courageous and influential enough to help other business leaders understand the importance of striking this balance for the long-term success of the organization.

HR has the opportunity to play this balancing role in a variety of circumstances. For example, an employer who is seeing its healthcare costs increase to an unsustainable point can call on its HR business partner to recommend a course of action that will resolve this problem. Looking to cut costs for the business, HR can propose a shift from a traditional healthcare plan to a consumer-driven high-deductible one. If carelessly implemented, this type of plan can be very detrimental for an employee population that does not know how such a plan works and is largely uneducated on how to be smart consumers of healthcare. In implementing this kind of change HR cannot forget about its role as an employee advocate. HR should execute this change alongside a thorough
change management strategy that includes assessment of needs and opportunities, communication, education, coaching, engagement of senior leadership, measuring progress, and troubleshooting, among others. Taking these measures will not only ensure a smooth transition into the new healthcare plan but will also ensure that employees’ voices are being heard throughout the process, that their concerns are being addressed, and most importantly, that they can benefit from this change just as much as the organization is benefiting from the lower costs. If HR fails to keep employee wellbeing at the forefront of its agenda as substantial changes are implemented throughout its organization, HR risks undermining not only the employees but also the business goals that it strives to accomplish. Why? Because healthcare benefits are an immense and very important part of the EVP. When this is eroded, employee engagement and productivity will soon start to suffer. Turnover rates, absenteeism, and presenteeism, among other measures, will begin to rise as a result. A similar point can be made for HR’s role in looking out for employee work-life balance. Although the trend will always be for the business to demand more and more of the employees’ time, HR can play a significant role in curbing this trend when the EVP starts to be affected.

Another reason why HR must never neglect its employee advocate role is evident in the bevy of employee lawsuits against employers that arise every day from workers’ rights violations. HR stands as the only in-house institution where employees can seek recourse to violation of their rights. The other recourses they are left with are governmental agencies and NGOs. In this capacity HR has an important responsibility to be an expert in matters of employee rights and labor issues. By guarding employee interests when it comes to delicate issues such as misclassification of exempt and non-exempt workers, sexual and racial discrimination, workplace safety, harassment, freedom of association, and religious freedom and accommodation, HR can save its organization millions of dollars in potential lawsuits and bad publicity. More importantly, however, HR can stand to prevent injustice towards individuals who are often at a disadvantaged point when they stand to lose their job and source of livelihood if they denounce nefarious actions in their workplace.

Just as organizations expect employees to put effort into serving their business goals and value creation, there is also an expectation for businesses to honor this symbiotic relationship by serving their employees through more than monetary compensation. HR stands in a unique place to ensure the maintenance of this interdependent relationship, as well as to balance expectations from each side. In this role employees expect HR to serve them in the ways outlined above: by guarding employee rights and by standing as a champion of the EVP. An erosion of these two factors could very negatively affect an organization’s log-term aspirations to grow and be successful.

**Conclusion**

HR’s goal of being a true strategic partner necessitates its continued role as an employee advocate who can influence other leaders and convincingly communicate the importance of guarding the EVP and employees’ fundamental rights. HR was traditionally considered an administrative or personnel function that implemented the commands or ideas of those
in the C-suite. Largely because of the advent of technology that can replace much of what HR used to do, as well as the fear of being outsourced, HR has been increasingly concerned with gaining “a seat at the table.” In this pursuit HR should not have to choose sides between being an employee advocate and a business partner. Instead HR should understand (and help others understand) that it can play a balancing role in the interception of these two conflicting interests – that of the employer and that of the employee. HR must strive to create value for its business through designing safe organizational systems that are free of discrimination, and where people understand, and feel empowered to contribute to, the business objectives of the organization.²

Maria Carolina Grillo is completing her second year of a Master in Industrial and Labor Relations at Cornell University. Before going back to graduate school, Maria Carolina worked in social services as a family consultant with high-risk child abuse cases in Miami, Florida. She also worked as a community organizer with diverse faith organizations and universities to address community issues in South Florida. A native of Barranquilla, Colombia, Maria Carolina has resided in the U.S. for 10 years.
