

# HR's Role In Organizational Success, The Role Of Applied Improvisation

From administrative to  
collaborative leadership

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Everyone aspires to have a seat at the table, but no one feels this more acutely than an HR professional. For decades, many organizations' view of HR has often been scornful; executives see them as a necessary evil, superfluous, unessential, and redundant rather than critical to the organization.

This assessment, however unfair, is a bit self-inflicted. There are countless HR units that perform necessary—but not strategic—administrative functions.

Transforming the reputation and purpose of HR units lies with HR leaders, who must be realistic about their value to each business unit in their organization. HR units must provide clear and compelling strategic value to gain a seat at the leadership table. But what is strategic importance, and how do we do it?

The good news is that progress is being made. Applaud's 2023 Digital Employee Experience Trend Report found that executives view 61% of HR leaders as strategic business partners. (1,2). Improving HR's position will require a targeted and triaged approach that identifies the critical business units where HR can provide strategic value and those that can't.

Industries in growing, emerging, and rapidly evolving fields where the pace of change is high and intellectual talent are critical are best positioned to involve HR in organizational success. Biotech, life sciences, and high-tech manufacturing are among those that demand more from their HR units.

These are industries where team building is paramount, higher levels of communication and collaboration are essential, and innovation and creativity are the foundation of success. These are industries where recruiting and retaining talented staff, motivating professionals, and building high-performing teams are make-or-break propositions. In these industries, HR's value to organizational success is clear; in others, it may be a bit cloudy.

*As Liz Ryan writes in Forbes, "Rethinking HR requires transforming the view that HR people are seen as political and more concerned with their place in the company's pecking order than with the welfare of the team" (6).*

## The Two Sides of HR

Distinguishing between two sides of HR – strategic and operational– is critical for HR to be the most successful. Every organization is unique and operates in a different market environment, so it's helpful, to begin with, the widely-accepted ten major HR functions and separate them based on operational and strategic functions:

- Human Resource Planning and Org Structure Design
- Recruitment, On & Off Boarding
- Performance Management, Promotion, Rewards, and Succession Planning
- L&D, Employee Engagement, and Communication
- Administrative and Record-Keeping
- Health and Safety
- Industrial Relations and Legal Requirements

Operational or administrative HR responsibilities include all tasks essential to organizational function, though ones that do not necessarily add strategic, differentiable, or distinguishing benefits. Running payroll, record keeping, and managing benefits are all vital, legally-required tasks, but they don't earn a seat at the table. Smaller and medium-sized HR units often have this focus.

Strategic HR, on the other hand, adds value, and plenty of it. Clear, consistent, and quantifiable processes for hiring the best talent ensure that innovation can

occur and productivity is at its highest. Consider the inherent value of poaching experienced professionals from a competitor in the BioTech industry or comprehensive training in the tech industry that keeps people at the bleeding edge of tech. Such initiatives directly influence an organization's bottom line and can raise the value of HR units. The HR challenge is creating a clear, convincing, and compelling business value proposition to present to business executives and then delivering on the promise.

After making this distinction between operational and strategic HR, organizations must analyze competitive, economic, and marketing factors to determine how best to emphasize strategic and operational elements for each business unit. While there is no one approach, such efforts must be tailored to each HR unit's capabilities, resources, and market position. However, several strategic elements leverageable by HR are practical across all business circumstances.

### Prioritizing Strategic HR for Organizational Success

Strategic HR provides value to an organization and improves an HR unit's credibility, but what can HR invest in to be strategic? The most essential element of strategic HR is getting everyone in each business unit

on the same page, synchronized, and aligned. All must be united in both setting appropriate goals and working toward them. The success of this endeavor hinges on five key areas: **trust, collaboration, communication, innovation, and leadership**. The best business/HR teams maintain open communication where innovative HR strategies can flow freely; where roles, responsibilities, and accountabilities are clear; and where business/HR teams can pool their knowledge and resources to accomplish strategic, not operational, goals.

These HR actions need to be pervasive within a business. It's just as crucial for teams to collaborate and communicate as for those teams to work smoothly across business lines. Furthermore, professional staff, managers, and executives must understand and trust each other's actions. Such trust leads to engagement, engagement leads to productivity, and productivity leads to profitability.

"If you don't understand the business levers, or the strategy, or how it impacts the people, you're going to be an HR person that builds things that nobody needs, nobody wants, and nobody can use," says Briggette McInnis-Day, chief people officer at enterprise software company UiPath. "I think that's the big shift. What we're seeing now is more analytical, understanding the business, and having a people strategy 100% linked to a business strategy."(4)



## Drawing Back the Curtain on a New Approach

It's not enough to prioritize strategy; action must be taken. And if the goal is to get all organizational stakeholders to trust and work together, drawing lessons from an unusual source –improv theatre can make great sense. For instance, consider a professional improv theater group or even the popular TV show “Whose Line Is It Anyway?”

Improv theatre operates under key constraints: It's a team-based activity where participants move forward without a script. The cast has to adapt to changes on the fly, generate authentic responses at the moment, and rely on their skills to navigate uncertainty. They must

be fully present and share equal accountability with everyone on stage. Cast members in an improv theater group have been prioritizing and honing these exact business skills for decades.

## The Role of Applied Improvisation (AIM)

Considering that these basic skills are utilized daily in modern business, it was inevitable that the lessons and principles of improv theatre could be directly applied to the business world. AIM programs have emerged as a great asset that HR can strategically implement to build professional staff and management competency and capability within their organizations.

AIM, or applied improvisation, is an innovative approach to enhancing leadership, management, and team function. In a professionally-taught AIM program, participants learn to apply fundamental collaboration principles and develop vital business skills to improve organizational function. This technique entails dropping the humor aspect, as dedicated AIM instructors instruct participants to look past an improv performance's comedy, cleverness, and amusing nature. This point must be stressed. AIM is wholly disconnected from entertainment-focused improv theatre and entirely concerned with building better business professionals.



During the engaging activities and discussions, participants are instructed to hone in on what an improv performer is thinking and doing. AIM instructors point out how the performers listen to each other, always focusing on what was just said and building upon it – dismissing ideas outright leads to a breach of trust among participants and creates chaos. When debriefing an exercise, participants examine their behaviors in a safe and judgment-free environment, gaining insight, skill, and proficiency in better business behaviors.

In maintaining lightning-fast communication and offering ideas, participants effectively deal with uncertainty and embrace it to progress the business strategy. They're making connections between ideas, adopting roles at the moment, and cooperating toward a common goal. Most importantly, they're working as one, sharing credit and supporting each other.

## Conclusion

AIM shows HR that the core elements of organizational success are already being demonstrated on an improv stage, and the value of this revelation for strategic-minded HR professionals can be immense. Embracing and empowering communication, collaboration, innovation, teamwork, and leadership leads to significant business success.

*As Francesca Gino, an Associate Professor at Harvard Business School, in Using Improv to Unite Your Team (Harvard Business Review May 2019 said, "In my academic research, I've looked at many different types of teams, at a wide variety of organizations all over the world. The group that communicated best, with everyone contributing and learning, wasn't in a corporate office park; it was in an improv comedy class." (8)*

All it takes is for HR to establish a few well-designed programs and recognize that trust is the glue that holds organizations together. Then, HR professionals prioritizing strategic HR will not just receive a seat at the table but earn it.

## References:

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