



HR poor on influencing skills

By Craig Donaldson

WHILE HR managers are generally good at networking, engaging and collaborating with business peers, recent research has found that 67 per cent of HR professionals lack what it takes to influence outcomes in their organisations.

A study of more than 1,500 middle and senior managers across Australia also found that HR professionals are also less adept at getting stakeholder buy-in when dealing with conflict.

One of the key reasons HR professionals fail on these two fronts is the fact that they have a service mentality and see their internal stakeholders much in the same way as a customer service operator views an inbound customer, according to Peter Zarris, CEO of OPIC, which conducted the research.

“They have a pronounced desire and drive to give the customer what they want and they are less inclined to stretch their relationship with stakeholders by challenging them and really pushing their point of view

when it comes to identifying new opportunities,” he said.

“For example, in situations where frontline managers reward staff by promoting them, HR managers should not acquiesce to this practice, as is often the case, but should bring home the fact that while the staff in question may be good at the job they’re doing, they may not have the necessary skills for the more elevated role.”

He said that HR practitioners must learn not to shy away from conflict. “They need to see it as a normal part

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of everyday business and if handled well, it can create new and better ways of doing things.

“Good influencers never leave the ‘undiscussables’ undiscussed. They deal with them then and there: they get them out into the open, looking for common ground and a way in which both parties can move forward,” Zarris said.

The effective use of conflict is critical to influencing strategically and to pushing forward with new opportunities and to partnering with stakeholders at the frontline, he said.

“One of the most commonly stated frustrations from frontline executives is that they would like their HR colleagues to be more than just administrative support. They’d like them to be more of a partner – even if it requires the occasional jousting.”

Undue emphasis on day-to-day transactional activities accounts for HR managers’ failure to influence strategically. “As a result leadership issues simply fall by the wayside.”

Failure to act will mean that HR professionals will continue to be seen as administrators who simply respond to requests and not as leaders capable of driving change, he said.

“They will continue not to be taken seriously by managers from other parts of business and they will never have a place at the decision-making table. However, taking the influential high ground will elevate HR managers to leaders who are capable of providing the solutions business needs.”

Managers should devote at least 40 per cent of their time or 10 hours a week to influencing, Zarris said, with the amount of time devoted to these activities increasing incrementally with seniority.

These activities should involve everything from one-to-one meetings with all managers, to setting up cross-functional forums on key issues, and facilitating building alliances between functions.

“In future the ideas and projects that get past first base will be the ones determined by those who have put in the hard yards and who’re prepared to devote time to the full spectrum of influencing activities,” he said.



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Improving influencing skills

- Build stakeholder networks. Identify all the people – both inside and outside your organisation – who impact on your area of business and who are important to your success. Depending on the size and structure of an organisation, this can vary. Your stakeholder management plan should not only outline the key people who need to be influenced, but also what their key issues and needs are.
- Engage with stakeholders. Once you know who is important to you, actively initiate meetings in order to understand what your stakeholders do and the challenges they face. Also show a willingness to engage in conversations outside your expertise. These meetings will also provide you with an insight into where you could potentially collaborate or share resources. It is not good enough to simply meet on one occasion. Networking with people needs to be an ongoing activity.
- Collaborate with stakeholders. Simply including your stakeholders in your decision-making is not enough. You need to find out what their ideas or views are first, before you offer your own. Don't be prescriptive; listen to what they have to say first. Taking a consultative and collaborative approach arrives at a result far superior to the one you originally devised.
- Manage conflict. Deal with it directly. Good influencers don't avoid conflict – they seek out any areas of disagreement and discuss these openly, in a positive and constructive way.
- Influence strategically. Identify opportunities where you can work with stakeholders in reaching mutually beneficial outcomes. Influencing strategically also involves a much deeper and more personal insight into your stakeholders – not just their challenges and drivers but how they feel emotionally about issues. This enables you to empathise with them and where there are problems, to acknowledge them, allowing for a much stronger and longer lasting relationship.

Source: OPIC