

How HR can help CEOs, from CEOs who started in HR



HR pros complain all the time that the top brass in their organizations don't value the HR function. A panel of three chief executive officers who spoke at **The HR Specialist Summit** in Las Vegas in September understand that frustration.

They all started their careers handling HR.

None have much patience for HR practitioners who merely wish they had a seat at the C-suite table.

Nicole Mouskondis, Scott Parson and Monica Whalen urged participants in The HR Specialist's newest conference to grab that seat by demonstrating their strategic value. That means solving business problems.

"CEOs only have the same 24 hours in a day that you do," said Whalen, former CEO of The Employers Council, a Salt Lake City provider of outsourced HR services. "The CEO may not be a people person. They need someone in the C-suite to fill that role. You're there to provide solutions and give them staffing and performance options."

Mouskondis agreed. The co-CEO of Nicholas and Co., a wholesale food distribution company in Las Vegas, recalled a time early in her career when a new CEO openly declared he didn't understand why their organization even needed an HR function. As far as he could tell, it was just another cost center to put on the chopping block.

"That shook me. I went home that night thinking my job was toast," Mouskondis said. But after sleeping on it, she figured she had nothing to lose. "I marched into his office the next day and said, 'By the time you leave this company, you'll consider me the most valuable person here.'" Years later, the CEO retired. Mouskondis, who had become a key advisor through several difficult corporate transitions, took his place.

Parson, president of the Western Division of Old Castle Materials in Ogden, Utah, says his early experience running HR in the family business reinforced the value of human factors as a competitive advantage. His company produces building and paving materials.

"Anybody with enough capital could start a business like ours. We sell rocks and gravel," he joked. "What is hard, however, is building the team structure that makes us successful."

Mouskondis, Parson and Whalen each offered advice to HR pros who want to leverage their influence with chief executive officers and other key decision-makers in their organizations.

Nicole Mouskondis, Nicholas and Co.

- 1. Speak the language of the CEO.** Understand what keeps him or her up at night, what the vision for the company is, what their “hot button” issues are. Figure out where gaps in organizational performance are occurring.
- 2. Understand how your company really makes money,** and how positions are interconnected within the organization. That will help you understand the cause and effect relationship involved in implementing change.
- 3. Reinforce your position** as an executive resource. Your role exists to help promote the best possible relationships between team members at all levels. This starts when you partner with executives to help grow, develop and communicate effectively with their direct reports.
- 4. Keep top of mind the increasing role technology is playing** as an enabler of employee success, not as a replacement for employees. Understand how HR professionals can help leverage return on investment in new technology through training, communication and team member engagement.

Scott Parson, Old Castle Materials

- 1. Clearly understand, articulate and demonstrate** how HR and talent enable achievement of corporate vision and strategy.
- 2. Become a trusted resource** to identify and reinforce behavior that will drive desired business results.
- 3. Become obsessed** with the things that the CEO is concerned with.
- 4. Proactively provide solutions** to business challenges in order to earn a “seat at the business leadership table.” Don’t come to the table with a chip on your shoulder.

Monica Whalen, The Employers Council

- 1. Don’t be the Department of No.** Tell the C-suite how they can, not why they can’t.
- 2. Build a harmonious relationship** with the C-suite. Prove that you are a trusted advisor and confidante to the CEO.
- 3. Analyze and understand** what your company’s data is saying so that you can make thoughtful, data-driven recommendations.
- 4. Become an expert** on some key aspect of the business, thus making yourself invaluable. Be the people problem fixer.