

The Role of the HRD in Strategic Alignment

Strong strategic debate at the top table is crucial and, without it, misalignment can occur. Business leaders tell **Emma Carroll** how the HRD can help get those conversations back on track

Debate is crucial on all leadership teams, but if dissent persists then trouble lies ahead. An independently minded HRD has a crucial role to play when strategic alignment starts to fragment. They have to call it out, re-establishing trust and uniting leaders behind a compelling business purpose.

In Criticleye's latest [research](#), HRDs said they must improve how they build alignment in their senior team. They also highlighted this as the top area for improvement by their CEO and CFO colleagues too. With this in mind, at our [HRD Forum](#), which was held in association with [Resource Solutions](#) and [Accenture](#), senior leaders from HR discussed the causes of top-team misalignment and how leaders can tackle it.

Jamie Wilson, Managing Director of Group Services at Criticleye, voiced the case for a well-aligned business. "The best senior leadership teams challenge the operating model, strategy and each other robustly, but ultimately, they emerge from the boardroom united," she said. "With new problems needing solutions on a daily basis, from spiralling energy costs to broken supply chains, there's no time today for personal agendas or inefficient working practices."

In a world of hybrid working, leadership teams need to work harder at building relationships. **Ailsa Firth**, HR Director at Arval UK, said, "If there are tensions, then to build trust, you must create opportunities to give feedback. That's tough, and when it's virtual, you have to work harder.

"We used a very simple feedback model, which is based on three questions: what do I value about you? What is the one thing you and I need to improve? And, how can we go about that? It sounds incredibly simple but it's very powerful, because when someone hears what another person values about them, they suddenly feel recognised and valued."

A clear and compelling purpose also drives productivity and engagement. **Chris Jones**, UKI HR Strategy & Consulting Lead at Accenture, explained, "There's little doubt that people are more productive when they understand and believe in what they are working towards – they become engaged and connected to a unifying purpose.

"However, research by Gallup suggests 87 percent of employees worldwide >



are not engaged. We need to create purpose-driven organisations, beyond economics, that deliver real value to people, society and the environment.”

Ailsa agreed: “You’ve got to start with your purpose: why are you doing what you’re doing and where are you trying to get to? If you don’t nail that then you’re lost.”

Establishing the right culture – and one that is understood and demonstrated by an organisation’s leaders – is another crucial milestone on the journey towards top-team alignment. This is a particular challenge following an acquisition or a capital markets event, such as an IPO.

Nichole Viviani, Chief People & Marketing Officer at Xplor, said: “Cultural change takes time, and when it’s within an M&A situation it takes even longer. Unlike a business that grows organically, where you can steer and guide the culture over time, you have multiple parties that are thrown together, each with their own sense of identity.”

Tea Colaianni, SID at Watches of Switzerland Group and a Board Mentor at Criticleye, said that a similar focus on culture is required following a public listing. “It is absolutely essential to spend the time necessary to bring the management team and the independent non-executive directors together, to find common ground around the table,” she said. “It is a time to nurture and maintain that entrepreneurial culture while reconciling it with all the governance requirements.”

Holding Leaders to Account

While ultimately the buck stops with the CEO when it comes to ensuring strategic consensus, a high-performing HRD will provide invaluable support. **Nichole**

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explained: “When getting alignment, I play the role of Chief Reminding Officer,” she said. “It’s easy to go away and agree things, but then you must ask: Are we keeping those things at the top of the agenda? Being honest with each other? Giving each other feedback and holding each other accountable?”

Nichole takes this further, saying that “we measure things like minimal politics, confusion and duplication”. Other important metrics for her are productivity and turnover of good people. “I think ego is one of the biggest blockers to alignment,” she added.

Calling out misalignment can be difficult, but if it’s done in the right way then the best Boards will welcome it. “Speaking up and being honest as an HRD is really important. Anyone who is confident and professional wants that challenge,” **Jamie** said. “However, remember that your role is to highlight the implications to the Board and not to provide all of the final answers. Sometimes executives get caught in the trap of trying to deliver solutions, rather than offering clearer insight to support and contribute to the decision-making.”

It’s essential to retain independence. “You have to put your ego and your career to one side, because you have a responsibility to the organisation to always keep in mind what you believe is right. That’s a judgement call, but you’ve got to stay true to that,” **Ailsa** said.

Tea provided a call to action for HRDs: “Find your voice and use your voice; stand up and speak up for what you believe is the right thing to do for your business. You don’t need anybody’s permission to sit at the top table,” she said. ■

Don’t miss Criticleye’s [Human Resources Director Retreat](#), on Thursday 24th and Friday 25th February 2022.

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Featuring Commentary From:



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