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Strategic Business Partner Role: Definition, Knowledge, Skills & Operating Tensions

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"Historically, many within the HR profession have lamented the lack of respect and acknowledgment for the services they provide. Now opportunity is banging at the door of every HR function to reverse that situation. The need to be more strategic and business-linked is evident."

Robinson & Robinson (2005)

Abstract

This chapter discusses the role of the Strategic Business Partner (SBP). A well-designed SBP role coupled with excellent delivery of operational HR functions can help in transforming the HR function. Human Resources, as a discipline, has been going through a great deal of change in the past two decades. Phrases such as "business partner" and "getting a seat at the table" are common. In spite of all of the change that has been going on, organizations still seem to struggle to get it right. However, due to the turbulent nature of the business world today and the resulting demands on human capital, the SBP role can be a highly valuable solution in organizations. The development of the SBP role comes from a combination of having skills and knowledge in the areas of Human Resources, Organization Development, business acumen, and being in partnership. However, once the competency profile is developed, it is also important to understand there are common tensions as an organization transitions from their current HR state to the use of an SBP model.

Introduction & Overview

In the opening quote above, Dana and Jim Robinson captured both past history and the contemporary situation. Whether Human Resources has been able to add value and provide strategic services before, the demand is paramount today. The types and intensity of global changes affecting organizations increasingly have human capital implications in both strategy and operations. While some HR functions will continue to require similar, tactical execution, the need for higher level strategic HR perspectives is growing. It is in this arena that the Strategic Business Partner role becomes essential and can add significant value.

HR has been going thru a great deal of change in the last two decades: rising in strategic importance and profile; continuous re-structuring, re-labeling and re-defining; outsourcing parts, functions, tasks or in some cases all of HR; focusing more on competencies and certifications, training and education; and serious work on re-defining what HR needs to be (Ulrich, 1997; Ulrich & Brockbank, 2005; Ulrich, Brockbank, Johnson, Sandholz & Younger 2008; Ulrich, Allen, Brockbank & Younger, 2009; Boudreau & Ramstad, 2007; Robinson & Robinson, 2005). Much of this work has led to the idea of becoming a "Business Partner." However, after many years of "rhetoric about becoming "business partners" with a "seat at the table" where the business decisions that matter are made, most human-resources professionals aren't nearly there. They have no seat, and the table is locked inside a conference room to which they have no key" (Hammonds, 2005). For that reason, we stress the need for the "Strategic Business Partner" (SBP) role. That is the role we will clarify and develop in this chapter.

In the following sections, we will discuss how HR has been changing over the past decade and the urgency behind making sure that organizations put an emphasis on building an HR function that delivers value both operationally and strategically. We advocate for the use of the SBP role as part of this solution. We follow up by identifying the mindset, knowledge and skill requirements needed for the role and making the case that the needed knowledge and skills come from: The HR discipline (especially strategic HR), key Organization Development (OD) foundational concepts, understanding business acumen and specific business context, models and drivers, and finally understanding what it means to be a 'partner' and operate in partnership. We conclude by discussing common tensions that occur when companies attempt to transition from traditional versions of HR to new models that include an SBP role. Although it is not a certainty that all of the tensions discussed will occur, it is still important to recognize that they may and to have a plan for overcoming them. Throughout the chapter, examples from practice will be used to help illustrate critical points.

HR Changes and Challenges Today

Over the last fifteen years, organizations have generally adopted the concept of Business Partner, at least partly, and experimented with variations of Business Partner roles with simultaneous strategies and structures for handling all the rest of HR functions. The goal has been to manage the tactical areas of HR efficiently and effectively and to simultaneously grow and develop the strategic areas of HR. Tactical areas of HR include the more compliance or administrative such as risk management (legal defense, compliance, legal and regulatory requirements and cost containment), employee relations (policy issues, supervision, etc.), and some day-to-day operational tasks of managing employment, benefits and payroll. The thinking behind this is that when these areas are managed effectively, there is then time and resources for the Business Partner role to deal with the human capital issues that impact the business strategically.

Organizations have tried to manage these other day-to-day tactical areas of HR by reassigning existing personnel, redefining existing roles or creating new ones, increasing automation, outsourcing work, transferring tasks to supervising managers, and improving and streamlining processes. They often try separating the tactical and strategic types of HR work

into different roles or units. Once separated, they then try to increase training with the goal of building skills for the generalists, business partners and other senior HR advisors engaging more in strategy and change. Much of this reconfiguration, although a step in the right direction, has not yet produced the desired results. Some of the difficulties have involved how roles and units are designed, the customer-friendliness of processes and training adequacy for both HR and internal users. It is also important to note that conceptually, the generic business partner or HR generalist roles may not be designed as comprehensively as we are developing the SBP role.

There is no doubt that decisions need to be made about executing the day-to-day tactical HR work. These activities do not go away and they need to be handled effectively or they will fall back in to the Strategic Business Partner's arena. When this occurs, the immediate needs of the daily transactional work nearly always smother the strategic, longer-term needs. If for example, a sexual harassment investigation needs to occur and if the HR department is not structured appropriately to handle the investigation then the SBP will have to conduct the investigation. A sexual harassment investigation is something that can't be postponed. When things like this begin to pile up, there becomes no time for the strategic work. In several situations we know of, a person moved into a senior HR role with the greatest intentions of being a Strategic Business Partner. In many of these instances, these people soon became frustrated, and at times overwhelmed with the amount of employee relations, payroll and compliance issues that quickly consumed their time. Often times in this situation, even the most strategic person began to lose the time to deal with the more strategic aspects of the business.

While all of the more traditional work of HR is important to the organization, our interest here is primarily in the strategic work of HR and the other human systems needs that should be incorporated into Strategic Business Partner role.

The Strategic Business Partner Role

To be explicit about the SBP concept, we believe the role must be developed around providing human capital and organization change perspectives embedded into business leadership teams. In order to be effective, they will need business credibility, the ability to work in partnership with the other leaders, and deep HR and OD functional knowledge. The SBP model is a way to ensure the human system implications and needed change strategies are part of business leadership decisions. It involves both what was always intended as strategic work in HR and new work in strategic thinking, organization design, culture change, human system alignment and change management. The specific context, characteristics, and demands of any industry or organization sector will ultimately drive this role.

In order to put more context around the Strategic Business Partner role, as Hanna (1988) says, we need to start by working from the outside-in. We live in a hyper- turbulent world. Today we must adapt to numerous unprecedented challenges that change the very nature of what business we are in and how that business gets conducted. The reality often includes doing business 24/7, globally across numerous cultural boundaries, with new technologies being invented daily and shifting technology generations yearly; responding to new forms of competition locally and globally; learning to manage an ever-shifting set of demographics; and keeping pace with the speed of change in everything. All of these realities have significant human capital implications, raising the value of strategic HR thinking (Jamieson, 2007). For example, organizations (and their SBPs) increasingly need to plan for the use of social media in communications, technology in working virtually, cultural competence in conducting business and change management for aligning people and systems during continuous change.

 It is within this context that we have to think about the role of the Strategic Business Partner. We need to take this outside-in approach with a focus on the current and future challenges of the organization. The SBP needs to be able to join with other business leaders to engage with the strategic implications of the rapid, specific changes driving their sector, industry

and organization. What role does the SBP have in helping the organization deal with these challenges and what skills does the SBP need to have in managing the challenges?

In looking for the solution as it relates to leading and managing an organization in this rapidly changing world, there isn't one answer. However, it is increasingly clear that the design, development and maintenance of the human system are as critical to future success as they are in financial, technical and operational systems. Organizations of all types need talented, engaged people, in well led, managed and designed organizations, working together and performing with an eye on today and tomorrow.

Who is going to step up to meet these challenges? The human systems issues in change, growth, strategy execution and high performance are paramount and require specialized perspectives and skill sets. The combined knowledge and skills that come from Strategic HR and OD, when coupled with business acumen, and an ability to effectively build partnerships can get you there. Yet, many in senior leadership are not yet convinced. Even though they see people issues as vital, the executives don't see HR and HR leaders as driving the people agenda in business today. When you ask them how HR is doing, barely 4 percent describe their company's HR as world class. 46 percent say HR's capabilities are OK but need to improve, and about a third say that HR needs significant improvement. (Deloitte and the Economist Intelligence Unit, 2007). The advent and development of the SBP role has potential to fill this void.

SBP's can be developed and positioned to support a business with the perspective and skills that help with organization effectiveness. Human system problems plague senior leaders daily, including issues like:

- Dealing with the employee or leader who isn't the right person for a job or doesn't have the right capabilities
- Identifying where tomorrow's leaders will come from
- Helping a team when it isn't performing at a high level
- Getting sales to work effectively with R&D or manufacturing
- Leading and gaining consensus from strategic planning sessions
- Designing and building an organization capable of executing the strategic direction
- Solving problems that lie at the interface of technology, people and performance
- Increasing innovation or speed across the organizations' processes.

It is worth highlighting that we believe the SBP role requires knowledge and skills from both Strategic HR and OD disciplines. This is not new, but has rarely been accepted historically. Our view of the next wave of organization effectiveness work will require the integration of HR and OD into execution of changes. And that will require shifting some mindsets and maybe changing some development avenues. There are numerous points of view on the role that HR plays in an organization and the role OD plays in an organization. In addition, there are numerous points of view on how to deploy these disciplines (if they are deployed at all). We have seen many variations of how these two disciplines are structured, deployed, integrated into roles or left to operate separately. While these various organization structures and approaches have had various levels of success, the restructuring of HR and OD departments and redesigning of the roles continues as organizations search for a more successful solution. From our perspective, we believe that the SBP role in an organization needs to become a new way of thinking about the use and delivery of strategic HR and OD knowledge and skills. In other words, the discussion is not about where HR and OD should report as functions within an organization. The discussion is about how the strategic aspects of HR and OD can be combined to develop a function and roles that meet the real business needs.

With this in mind, if an organization plans to make a transition from their current HR organization mindset and structure to one that includes an SBP role there are many issues that can hinder the success of this transition:

- Making the decision that human capital issues are now critically important and need to be addressed in conjunction with other strategic, business considerations
- Moving from HR as an authoritative role, an order-taking role or an internal customer service role to a partnership role with the SBPs working in equal executive partnerships with other leaders.
- Moving from being past-oriented often cited as "this is how we do it around here" to becoming future-oriented and innovative to deal with unprecedented global challenges and rapid technology, market and economic shifts.
- Finding and/or developing people for these SBP roles who can understand the "business" of the organization and what other functional, unit and corporate leader's need, from a human capital perspective, to execute strategy.
- Needing new knowledge and skills (e.g., in change, consultation, organization design, innovation, creativity and problem-solving) that are antithetical to historical HR work.
- Thinking about the organization's business and strategy in terms of talent implications, core customers and key competitors, not benchmarks, uniformity, consistency or one-size-fits-all.
- Balancing the plethora of federal & state regulatory and compliance needs with differentiating organization resources for competitive advantage.
- Re-creating a new reputation and credibility for delivering value and helping other organization leaders to relate to SBPs in a new way.

Essential Mindset Shifts

Creating SBP roles is not just renaming some jobs or training people in new skills. For many in HR it involves significant shifts in mindsets used to guide and shape the role, work and behavior. For example:

- **From past-focused to future-focused**. Many of the answers cannot be found in the past since the issues never existed before. For example, if an organization clings to a rule such as an employee needs to be in a role for 2 years before they get promoted, and if the employee is a top talent who feels ready for the next role, they may very well lose the employee who has more access to job opportunities than ever before at his/her fingertips via the internet.
- **From discipline-focused to having an organization perspective.** SBPs need to learn to start with the organizations' strategic needs and use more innovation, creativity and problem-solving to find unique solutions. Thinking from only an HR or OD discipline perspective leads more into best practices, what others have done and the consistency of what we've done in the past.
- **From authoritative to consultative.** The SBP of the future will work in partnership and as equals with other business leaders and will use more consultative practices and influence methods to credibly help all understand the human perspective in relation to business issues being discussed. The role will not be looked at for policing, but more for how to solve competitive and strategic issues within essential legal and risk guidelines.
- **From service provider serving internal customers to partner with other leaders.** A big shift needs to take place to understand how to act in equal ways and in partnership with others, rather than either telling people what they can and can't do or taking orders from higher level leaders. Many in HR's past learned to emphasize more of the passive side of their role or the policeman side of their role. And in different cultures HR had more or less authority.
- **From being an HR/OD person in a business to being a business person with HR/OD perspectives.** Many HR people focus on the discipline itself and create programs, policies and processes that are time consuming and don't deliver value. They are often influenced more by the knowledge of the discipline. These people are HR people who happen to be in a business. The need is to have people who understand the business issues and who then

have the ability to create high impact solutions. These people will be driven more by strategic needs and the requirements of their leader partners and will use their different human systems perspectives to create solutions that can work. These people are business people with an HR/OD perspective.

- **From focus on and measurement of activities to results-based accountability.** Results get measured in terms the business values while HR has a long history of counting things done, people participating, numbers processed, etc. Value added is the new currency. HR analytics becomes the new measurement system that turns or relates important HR outcomes into business metrics used throughout the organization.

Core Knowledge and Skills

In creating and designing SBP roles, there are four competency areas to draw from to build the knowledge and skills necessary for success. They are: Understanding the 'business' of the organization, Strategic HR, Foundational OD and Partnership. The following figure depicts the four pillars for the SBP role:

Insert Figure 1

Understanding the Business

The first competency area to navigate and master is gaining a deep understanding and fluency in the particular "business" or unit you are working in. Put simply, HR professionals need to be knowledgeable in the 'business' of their organization, whether it's a corporation, non-profit, school or hospital. This includes what it does, its products or services, customers, markets, competitors, how it works, its business model, performance and financial drivers, human resources, the mission, direction, strategy, history, culture, environment and global influences. As Bardwick says (1998, p35) it is the need to understand the "business of the business". The Strategic Business Partner needs to become a 'business' person who brings the special value of an HR/OD mindset. They can't be HR/OD people who just happen to operate in a business. More simply put, the SBP needs to know how the business makes and spends money so they can understand how to support contributing to their 'bottom line' and organizational sustainability.

Strategic Human Resources

The second critical arena of knowledge and skills is in understanding the strategic aspects of HR work. There are strategic and operational aspects to most HR functions and the SBP needs clarity and competence in what they are, how to separate them and how they impact the workplace, workforce and strategy (Jamieson, 2007). For example, understanding how to design and implement a total rewards compensation approach in order to support and even drive the behaviors that will meet the needs of the customers is a strategic example whereas administering the employee benefits is operational. The talent needs created by a new strategy is highly strategic, while updating employee records is operational.

Talent Management is clearly one of the strategic HR elements and part of the skill set required in an organization. We summarize talent management by saying it is the practice of putting the right people, in the right job, performing at the right level, with the right skills at the right time with a focus on retaining and engaging the talent. This deals with some of the historical classic elements of HR such as recruitment and selection, performance management, employee development, succession management and total rewards. A primary aspect of Talent Management is that it looks at the sub elements from an integrated and interrelated perspective. For example, some organizations identify the desired behaviors for employees believed to lead to the success of their organization. These behaviors are often translated into competencies. This organization then hires, develops and rewards people based upon a level of achievement

as it relates to these competencies. If we were to build a luxury hotel, we would have a general contractor working with all the different trade groups. The same can be said for good Talent Management. In order to strategically work with the different aspects of talent management, a SBP works as the general contractor making sure all the elements fit together for their particular business unit.

Additionally, other strategic HR arenas to consider include: how to use technology to reduce cost and streamline processes, diversity and inclusion on a domestic and global level and its impact on the business, measurement and ROI of HR policies and practices and managing for employee engagement. The SBP needs to separate these strategic elements from the tactical elements and focus on developing these skills.

The third area of skills and knowledge that a SBP needs comes from the world of Organization Development.

Foundational Organization Development

From the OD world, the capabilities needed are the ones that help create an environment that allows the employees to operate at their fullest potential. It includes looking at organizations as systems and looking at organizations from the individual, team, and organization perspective. From a specific knowledge and skills perspective it requires a deep understanding of whole systems change, organization design, strategy development, leadership development, team development, organization diagnostics and assessment, coaching, facilitation, organization culture and the use of applied behavioral sciences to improve the effectiveness of human system dynamics.

For example, if an organization has a strategic goal to improve customer satisfaction an understanding of organization design can significantly and favorably impact that goal. If the existing organization structure is more of a classical functional structure a decision might be made to transition to a market based structure. Organization structure drives behavior and a functional organization structure brings functional expertise, but often less integrated delivery and a market based structure, that combines employees from the different functions, may provide more of a focus on knowing markets and customers.

So far we have discussed the business knowledge, HR knowledge, and OD knowledge required to become a SBP. The fourth area has to do with a deep understanding of what it means to actually be a "partner."

Partnership

Understanding what it means to become a partner and to actually have the ability to be a partner is equally important. For example, a partner has to get to know the people he/she hopes to partner with and build relationships. This involves understanding interpersonal relations, individual personality characteristics and styles and having empathy. This goes beyond having discussions only at the task level. Good partnership requires a relationship at a personal level. This then begins to provide the basis for the necessary levels of openness and trust for the relationship to develop into a strong partnership. Partnership also requires the ability to discuss differences and manage conflicts while maintaining the on-going relationship.

Another important aspect of partnering can be learned from the sales process. Good sales people, in working with their customers, know how to listen, develop relationships and identify areas where they can add significant value. Several aspects of this approach can, and need to be utilized by SBPs as well if they want to move from an "internal customer" mindset to the strategic business partner mindset.

Once this is achieved, the relationship will be at the level where you can talk openly and freely, influence each other, collaborate and act authentically in jointly developing goals and executing against strategies. Once you understand the business, know your partner and the consultative process, you now have a solid basis for open and honest discussions. These

discussions are necessary so the goals, projects and initiatives necessary to add real value to the business can be *jointly* developed and the value you bring can be utilized.

In Table 1 below the four competency areas are further developed with key knowledge and skills.

Foundational OD	Strategic HR	Understanding the Business	Partnership
Whole systems change	Talent Management: • Selection/ recruiting	Company –products, R&D, history, "business of business"	Relationship building (honest, integrity, trust, authentic, transparent)
Organization design	• Performance Management	Future direction and strategy	Discovery and articulating value
Strategy development	• Succession management and workforce planning	Environmental trends: society, competitors, customers	Influence and influencing
Leadership development	• Employee development • Total Rewards	Value chain	Ability to articulate a point of view; prepared, studied and sometimes courageous
Group dynamics and team development		Project management	Open, two-way communication (speaker and listener)
Consultative process		Supply chain and outsourced partners	Seeker and giver of helpful feedback
Organization assessment	Technology - cost reduction, improving process, communication, learning	Social and community responsibility	Engage with each other and the work
Coaching	Diversity and inclusion domestic and global	Globalization impact	Coach each other on effectiveness
Dynamics of culture	Employee engagement	Financial – understand profit and growth Performance metrics	Collaborate
Conflict management	Metrics and analytics		

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Table 1. SBP Core Competencies and Key Knowledge and Skills

Common Tensions & Issues

In the transition to creating these SBP roles and in the execution of these roles there are some natural tensions that arise, creating common issues to manage in order to arrive at the desired end state. These transition tensions are more prevalent when people are being asked to assume the new role while deeply steeped in past roles, culture and mindsets.

1. ***Breaking free from past history and reputations***

Here there is a tension between breaking free from past reputation and practices and building new credibility and trust. First there is the question of how the traditional HR organization has operated. Traditionally HR has struggled to quantify its contribution to the success of an organization. Often HR is under scrutiny to cut costs, be more effective and show proof about how it contributes to the top line and bottom line of an organization. HR is sometimes cited as being the enforcer because they hold the organization accountable for adhering to HR policy and labor laws. The combination of data and details often leads HR to slow delivery of solutions. Evaluation and metrics are key issues for HR. Despite numerous decades of attempted measurement and espoused value some believe little progress in measuring human capital, engagement, and human performance has been made and the connection in relating it all to business outcomes has been weak.

The tensions are natural and drive certain issues. A closer examination of the transition to SBP often reveals that full organizational support is lacking. Exploring the tensions around fixed ways of seeing, thinking and doing things is a way to begin to understand the current mindsets that exist, the dynamics around relationships and the behaviors preventing others from recognizing the role shift. Here's an example of an individual making a change from an HR generalist to SBP and dealing with past reputation.

Mary is an HR Generalist moving into a newly identified role - Strategic Business Partner. This particular HR organization has a reputation of "taking forever" to get something done. In fact the executive leadership dismissed HR as a value added member of the leadership, seeing value only in that paychecks are issued on time.

Initially there was a lot of discussion about letting go of the historical thinking and past approaches, and understanding why the past ways no longer served the needs of the organization. Getting past the logic of the business case and delving into conversations was difficult. These types of discussions were not typical meeting agenda items and it was difficult for her to identify the mindsets, barriers and constraints that were holding her back. Through challenging conversations about her beliefs and beliefs others held, Mary was able to name the current practices and begin to shape her thinking and mindset as well as other's thinking about the SBP role.

As Mary gained confidence and more visibility in her strategic business partner role others begin to build confidence in the value she was contributing to the organization. Understanding how to link key business drivers to recruiting and performance management processes was hugely valuable and it began to elevate Mary from the process administrator to a strategic partner. She realized that engaging in the strategic conversation, embracing the skills and knowledge of partnering and contributing to the development of strategy was essential to building credibility and trust among the leadership.

2. ***Where do I reside?***

For some the transition raises identity issues around where one belongs and where one is accepted. Becoming a partner with other business leaders can involve learning to get along with different types of people (IT, manufacturing, marketing, etc.) and sometimes working with people who in the past didn't have the highest view of you or the HR function. Most professionals have an affinity group and in some ways the SBP moves away from the old HR

group into a new space where they need to bridge with HR resources in service of business needs. What you're able to bring to the business unit is a set of skills that most of the other leaders don't possess. Group inclusion is a powerful driver in shaping individual behavior and it needs to be clear where one's affiliations and loyalties lie and becoming part of a social system is usually important to most people.

3. ***Staying strategic***

Navigating the transition to a Strategic Business Partner is somewhat like a catch 22. The expectations of internal customers (new business as well as HR staff members) about what the SBP can and should contribute to the organization may vary considerably since they often expect HR to only deliver administrative services in conventional ways. If requests and delivery of other HR services are not adequately handled by others or are never funneled away from the SBP, the task load can stymie any strategic work.

If expectations don't change, then the SBP is pressured to focus on delivering the core processes without attempting to develop a strategic contribution. And while some internal customers will appreciate the focus on delivering transactional work, the flip side is that other customers will criticize the SBP for not fulfilling the promise to add value at the strategic level.

How the operational HR tasks are organized and delivered will also play into how well the SBP can stay on strategic issues. If tasks keep falling into the SBP lap because they are not being handled well elsewhere or because organization managers and employees can't let go of traditional ways of working, then it will be difficult to spend more time in strategic areas.

4. ***Walking the talk***

One way to begin changing the way you work with individuals in the organization is to identify your skills gaps and accelerate what you need to learn. It helps to be open about what you bring and what you need to develop. It's common to struggle gaining the skills of an SBP. One of the tensions that comes into play is managing the expectations of employees in the organization who believe the SBP comes to the role fully skilled and experienced. In many cases, the organization has announced the role shift to SBP and individuals making the shift are not yet ready. Additionally, for current HR employees moving into a new role, there can also be a comfort zone issue, as one leaves what they've come to know well and are now being asked to perform at a different level or with different behaviors. So, sometimes you can't do it well quickly enough and other times those you work with don't really let you behave differently. There are many social system dynamics at work during these transitions.

5. ***Living the Partnership***

Establishing a partnership relationship takes a lot of work and skill. First, all parties have to help in creating new expectations and defining the value-added role. Second, all parties have to let go of old roles and behaviors, such as taking orders, being a policeman or serving in an authoritative way. Third, one has to build new credibility, trust and openness (if they haven't had that previously). Fourth, in partnerships each person has value and contributes to the business plans and outcomes. Finally, partners create different behaviors for working together.

It also helps to establish equality so both parties can bring their best forward and don't feel restraint during interactions. Partnership requires give and take and the ability to have differences, yet maintain the on-going relationship.

Summary and Conclusion

Significant change has emerged in the organization world. The HR and OD disciplines are being greatly affected. This is good news! A great opportunity is knocking in which the value of these functions can contribute to organization effectiveness and success in new, unprecedented waters.

HR has a long history of being more compliance and operationally oriented without as much of a track record in integrating strategic human capital thinking into business decisions. This has created a lot of existing role expectations and makes it difficult to operate in a new, more strategic and critical role in the organization. It also creates some transition difficulties for existing individuals asked to serve in new roles with different behaviors.

However, today's new demands hit squarely in the human systems arena, involving changing behavior, helping organizations to continually change, changing organization designs regularly, creating new cultures to attract and retain a changing workforce, and working cross-culturally and virtually. The applied behavioral sciences and human resource disciplines are most relevant for today's business needs.

All of the operational HR functions need to be done well either internally or externally and they need to be organized for user convenience and effectiveness. In addition, the new role of Strategic Business Partner needs to be more fully developed and enacted to provide a different senior level perspective, to integrate human capital thinking into business decisions and to assist in strategic matters that involve people.

It has been hard to find examples of all of this being done well. But with the extensive HR transformation work underway and the many different models, structures and role designs being implemented, our learning curve should accelerate. We hope so and encourage research and practice to stay connected in aiding HR during this greatest opportunity.

The value proposition of HR has to change. This may also change what is considered within HR or outside. In recent years, functions like organizational communications, design, culture, diversity, employee development and change management have all been inside the HR umbrella or adamantly separated. As organizations cope with new global environments and business paradigms, interdependencies are showing up everywhere and functions are being merged. New solutions often involve integrations across disciplines and organizational units.

One area we feel more sure about is how the significant environmental shifts coupled with the revolution in HR thinking is creating the perfect storm for integrating, joining or drawing from two disciplines critical to organization effectiveness and especially focused on the human system: Strategic HR to manage the human capital, quality of work life, and talent competency; and OD to manage the design, change and effectiveness of the new workplace. These are the core competencies, coupled with business acumen, that make a Strategic Business Partner.

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Figure 1. SBP
Competency Areas

Figure 1. SBP Competency Areas

Bios

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Sue Eklund

Sue's background includes 25 years of learning and organization development. She has worked in education and non-profit organizations and has spent several years in leadership positions in corporate training and global leadership and learning in

companies including Dayton Hudson, Seagate and Ecolab. She is skilled at working with organizations to quickly assess their performance and design and facilitate interventions that align with business strategies. Sue has presented research at the NYC Work Life Conference Board, the Business and Social Responsibility National Conference, the UST Center for Business Ethics, the Boston College Work and Family Conference, and the Wharton School of Business Work Life Roundtable. Sue has a B.S. in Education, a M.A. in Educational Leadership from MN State University, and a Doctorate in OD from the University of St. Thomas. Sue is Sustainer President Elect for the Jr.League of Minneapolis and Advisor for Free Arts MN.

Bob Meekin

Bob is founder of The OD Center. Bob's career has taken him all over the world, working for organizations such as Chrysler Corporation, Exxon Chemical, Mesaba Airlines, KGP Logistics, Becton Dickinson and GN Hearing Instruments, where he has consulted and held senior leadership roles for including Director of Organization Development (OD) and VP of Human Resources.

Bob received a B.A. from St. John's University, an M.A.I.R from the University of Minnesota, and an M.S. Degree in OD from American University and NTL in Washington D.C. where he graduated with distinction. Bob began the St. Thomas Doctorate Program in OD in April, 2008. Bob also teaches on an adjunct basis at Hamline University, University of St. Thomas, Capella University and Concordia University.

Bob has learned about organizations through both hands-on experience and higher education. Bob has a broad and deep understanding of Organization Development and Human Resources, with organization assessment and design, succession management and team development as strong areas of expertise. Bob has also successfully designed and worked in high performing HR and Organization Development functions within organizations domestically and internationally.