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4 Ways To Become A Strategic Business Partner (And Why You Should Want To)

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Careers

I hang out with a lot of HR folks. Given that much of what we do at [Proteus](#) is in support of employees' professional development – executive coaching, management skills training, team development – we very often work closely with the HR teams in our client companies.

Over the past ten years or so, I've noticed that 'being a strategic partner' has become a kind of mantra for HR people everywhere. Generally, they seem to mean, *"we'd like to be included the conversations where the future of the business gets determined, and have a real voice in those conversations."*

Lately, I've observed that the IT folks, the finance people, and the communications groups are saying the same thing. And I suspect that younger people in any function who want to advance in their careers are thinking or saying some version of it, too. It's a very legitimate and human thing, to want to be taken seriously and valued for one's contributions at

the highest level. And for folks in the ‘shared services’ realm – all the functions that support the whole organization – it also makes sense from an organizational perspective: having HR, finance, legal, IT, etc. weigh in on big decisions earlier in the process helps to make sure that all critical factors are taken into account.

So, how do you get invited into those organization-critical conversations? And – perhaps even more important – what does it take to become an actual participant in them; for the most influential people in your company to see you as a valuable addition?

*Let me start by saying there’s one sure way **not** to do it: force yourself in.* I’ve seen people try that in all kinds of ways: get the CEO or some other senior person to mandate their inclusion; wangle it into the company policy; change reporting structures; use various threats and/or forms of coercion. This never works long-term. **Never.** People will simply have meetings and “forget” to invite you, or pointedly ignore you at the meetings you do attend.

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The best way I know of to be treated like a strategic business partner is to think and act like one. Which means:

Really understand the business. Know what makes your company

tick and what gets in the way of its ticking. Get clear about how all the different parts operate together, and – again – what gets in the way of their smooth operation. Become knowledgeable about the competition, and understand how your company is better and worse than they are. Be able to articulate your understanding.

Get out of your box. If you look at what the company needs only from the perspective of your own function (HR, IT, marketing – whatever it is), you will be seen as tactical at best, and an impediment to the business' success at worst. Step back and think about what would best serve the business overall. Speak from that vantage point. Hold yourself accountable to represent the company's interests (especially when they conflict with yours) and you'll be seen as a real asset to any organizational-level discussion.

Be useful in a big way. Talk is cheap. If you want to be seen as valuable, actually help the line business people in your organization meet their goals. Either do things in your own area that make it easier for them to do their jobs, or share ideas (based in your real understanding of the business) about how they can achieve goals more easily or quickly. If good things happen for the business as a result of you being involved in projects, you'll be invited back.

Listen. The best way to do all three of the things I've noted above is to start by really, truly listening. Get deeply curious. Summarize to make sure you've understood. When you get new information, listen very carefully to hear how it relates to what you already know and what it says about the person who's speaking. People love to be deeply listened to – they see excellent listeners as wise, insightful and interesting. (Yes, you

read that right – people see those who listen to them as being more interesting people. I think it's because someone who's interested in us is interesting to us!)

Finally, remember that reputation and influence are built over time. If you start behaving in these ways, you'll begin to be seen as a great person to have around. The more you fulfill that positive expectation, the more it will be reinforced. And soon you'll be someone they check with to make sure you're available before they schedule that important meeting...

(An earlier version of this post appeared here on 3/21/2011)

Check out [Erika Andersen](#)'s latest book, ***Leading So People Will Follow***, and discover how to be a [followable leader](#). Booklist called it “*a book to read more than once and to consult many times.*”

Want to know what Erika and her colleagues at Proteus do? Find out [here](#).

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