



Business Partnering: Tipping the balance from operational to strategic

Becoming a Business Partner paints a picture of a functional expert who has traditionally supported the core operating areas of businesses, changing to become an integral part of the strategic decision making team.

Essentially, business partnering means that a member of a support team, be it HR, Finance, IT or any other support function, is aligned to a part of the business to work hand in hand with them, bringing their functional expertise and experience to add business value, rather than simply to support.

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The Business Partner model was originally devised by Dave Ulrich in his book ‘Human Resource Champions’ in 1997. Ulrich described how HR could be aligned to business processes and contribute more to business outcomes. The four outcomes he proposed that are most important for HR are: strategy execution, administrative efficiency, employee contribution and capacity for change.

The model has been recognised and implemented in a wide range of businesses around the world with varying degrees of success. This success is often dependent on how well the model is communicated, understood and supported across the whole business, plus the new business partners’ ability to fulfil their role and be seen to be adding real business value. Being clear on exactly what the role is and providing the means to develop the skills needed to succeed, are essential for a business embarking on the transition.

Business Partnering

Being a successful business partner can be challenging. Maintaining operational focus and expertise whilst being able to think and make an impact strategically, is a tough balance to achieve. It requires a mix of business knowledge, new skills and behaviours that functional specialists need to develop whilst ensuring that their professional knowledge and thinking is kept up to date.

One perspective on what it takes to be a successful business partner has been developed by David Maister who wrote 'The Trusted Advisor' in 2000. Maister suggests that a key element to becoming a successful business partner is to be trusted by your clients; to build, maintain and put authentic trust to work in business relationships to achieve improved bottom line outcomes. Being trusted by the operational parts of the business can enable support functions to bring an extra dimension to the table that adds significant business value. The aim of a business partner is to be invited to take a seat at that table from the outset rather than be called in at the eleventh hour as happens in so many organisations; to be recognised and valued for what they can bring.

Trust

Trust is a difficult concept to understand and describe as it has many dimensions. It is equally difficult to master for individuals and especially entire functions of a business. If a business advisor is to be genuinely trusted, Maister suggests that there are four core components that form a trust equation. The equation determines the extent of trust that can be achieved in a relationship.

The trust equation can be used to separate each element necessary to achieve trust in a business relationship, which enables targeted development. This approach can achieve quicker and more effective results than trying to build trust generally, not least as it raises awareness of why the relationships are or are not effective. Being effective in all four of the components, not two or three at the expenses of the others, is necessary for building and maintaining trust.

The TRUST Equation

$$T = \frac{C + R + I}{S}$$

T = Trustworthiness

C = Credibility

I = Intimacy

R = Reliability

S = Self-orientation

*Maister, D., Green, C. H. & Galford, R. M., 2000, The Trusted Advisor, New York: Free Press

Credibility

The importance of credibility is relatively easy to understand. In this equation, credibility is clarified as not just specialist expertise; it's also about how that expertise is shared and applied. Is the business partner using their expertise for the benefit of the subject at hand, communicating it so others understand its value to the situation and feel engaged in what is being said? Being honest, whether the answer is known or not, is also a key element of achieving credibility. An effective business partner uses a blend of technical knowledge and behavioural skill to get others to trust what they say. Executed poorly, trying to prove credibility can come across as being able to regurgitate knowledge of a specialist subject without considering the situation it needs to apply to or the other people working on it. The aim is of course to add value to the bottom line rather than prove the hard work that has been put into gaining qualifications.



Intimacy is about gradually establishing a relationship where emotionally charged subjects can be discussed in the interest of business outcomes



The final two elements of the equation are intimacy and self-orientation. These are considered by Maister as "the most effective, as well as the most common, sources of differentiation in trustworthiness. Both are relatively scarce compared to credibility and reliability".

People in business as well as everyday life trust others with whom they are willing to have difficult and tough conversations and who clearly demonstrate that they care.



Intimacy

Intimacy is about making a genuine connection with the client by establishing an emotional closeness. This element is the most often misunderstood as the need to share elements of an individual's private life. It is about gradually establishing a relationship where emotionally charged subjects can be discussed in the interest of business outcomes. It can be achieved through each party offering something about themselves, with the other responding accordingly. At some stage one will stop responding when the maximum level of intimacy has been reached for them. The type of information that can be offered can be as simple as an honest opinion about a decision that has been made, or being open about past experience that underpins a recommendation.

Self-orientation

Being able to focus on the right agenda is the key to achieving the right level of self-orientation, the final component of the trust equation. This is the context that all of the other components of trust must sit within and is the only one that it is necessary to keep relatively low, rather than increasing. Self-orientation is about being able to pay attention to and, most importantly, genuinely caring about the outcome of the situation on the table. Listening intently to others, never simply waiting to speak, skilfully questioning to deepen our understanding just enough to be able to add value and be able to tell the clients story before writing our own, are skills that will increase the ability to lower self-orientation.

Being able to do this and demonstrate it to others is a powerful tool in establishing productive and successful client relationships as a business partner, which along with credibility, reliability and intimacy lead to being valued as a trusted advisor.



Listening intently to others and skilful questioning to deeper understanding are critical for effective business partnering



Becoming a fully-integrated business partner can transform the relationships you have within your organisation and the value of the contribution you and your team make.

Talk to us about how we can help you

- Focus on the high-value activities and initiatives – those things that make a real difference to business success
- Reduce unproductive activities and wasted effort and resource
- Change the perception of your team
- Build the reputation of your team as a proactive, strategic partner in the long-term success of your organisation

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