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## The CEO and HR: How To Meet in the Middle

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# The CEO and HR: How To Meet in the Middle

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How can the CEO and HR department find their common ground? CEO Paul Johnson advises that organizations can't *save* their way to greatness – they *grow* their way to greatness. This requires developing a clear strategy and investing in good tools to make it all happen: your people. Ultimately, this is how the CEO and HR can meet in the middle and make great things happen together.

Human Resources and Organizational Development practitioners play an essential role in gaining competitive advantage for their organizations through human capital. Their impact is felt across the business in bringing new talent into the fold, and developing strategic leaders to drive corporate goals. However, many professionals in the field still complain of a lack of visibility and access to key decision makers at that elusive executive “table” within their organizations.

Paul Johnson is one CEO who knows from experience about the value of developing a close working relationship with HR. Johnson recently presented to Queen's IRC participants in the *Organizational Development Foundations* course held in Kingston, Ontario, offering tips on how the CEO and executive team can work more effectively with human resources and organizational development initiatives.

As an award-winning CEO of Quantum5X Technologies in London, Ontario, and innovative venture capitalist, Paul Johnson has always gravitated to leadership roles throughout his educational and career paths. He enthusiastically espouses that what happens in your early life is foundational to the success – or failure – of your working career. Raised in a multi-generational rural farming community, Johnson proudly speaks of a strong work ethic, sense of passion, and willingness to take calculated risks as essential developmental traits for any CEO to effectively lead an organization, large or small.

With an undergraduate engineering degree from the University of Waterloo and MBA from Harvard University, Johnson has moved around “a lot”, by his own admission,

and seen many different organizations from Boston to Phoenix to Toronto and various North American points in between. Along the way, he's learned that in business, selling is everything. In demonstrating effective leadership, however, communication becomes everything – and that's his mantra for building successful management relationships.

In his presentation to Queen's IRC, Johnson provides sound advice on how human resources professionals can develop credibility and build meaningful partnerships with the CEO and executive team. His top eight tips include:

1. If you want your initiative to succeed, **make sure your CEO is on board before you launch**. If not, you have a 50/50 chance, at best, of success.
2. **Speak the language of the CEO and the business you're in**. Frame your ideas and proposals in the language of the vision, mission and values of the organization. The greater the extent that you can demonstrate to the CEO that your initiatives will further the corporate vision and mission, the more successful you will be.
3. **Communicate impact to your CEO, not activities**. For example, a CEO and executive team would rather hear *what* the intended impact of five days of training will be, as opposed to the fact that you are just going to deliver five days of training on X or Y subject with specific costs.
4. **Get agreement on your proposed activities as they relate to vision and mission**, then develop your plan. Furthermore, get advance agreement on the measurement of success that this initiative will achieve in changing behaviours, improving recruitment, productivity, etc.
5. **Develop a budget that is appropriate** for your initiative and audience, whether it be training, coaching, etc, and **then launch with a pilot first**. Invest heavily in thoughtful and meaningful planning upfront and then make modifications to your plan, if needed. Better to work out the kinks with a small group as opposed to launching a misstep in front of the entire organization.

6. **Demonstrate that you can lead a team and you understand process.** The CEO and executive team require high-level employees with these skills to affect positive change and achieve results across the business.
7. **Always think before acting – or speaking.** Be careful and deliberate with your intended purpose and focus on generating targeted impact. Remember, you shouldn't try to "boil the ocean" ...keep in mind what your strategic key initiatives are and evaluate their overall impact on the organization.
8. **Increase your capabilities and extend your capacity.** Emulate the effective skills and behaviours you see in your CEO. If she or he views you as a capable extension of their own skill sets, they will be more likely to rely upon you and value your input.

As important as it is for HR/OD professionals to demonstrate these abilities to develop a positive working relationship with their CEOs, Johnson also outlines some key responsibilities the CEO must fulfill to meet his or her side of the bargain.

A CEO is not doing his or her job properly if not leading by example. As an example, this includes being present for training seminars – not necessarily to participate in the core programs for specific skill development, says Johnson, but to show support from the executive team as a figurehead and role model for the rest of the company. These actions may be symbolic as well as tactical, but the CEO's demonstrated commitment speaks volumes about the importance of HR/OD to the organization.

Additionally, Johnson encourages human resources and organizational development professionals to develop a broad range of skills in many different industries: don't be afraid to move around the organization and gain different experiences with other companies. Gone are the days of lifelong loyalty to the same institution for 30+ years of your career. Within acceptable limits of every five years or so, seek out career changes and opportunities to add to your overall expertise.

