

## **From Expert to Partner: The Human Resources Journey**

### **THE CLIENT**

March 18, 2002 marked the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of a company that has achieved success through reinvention, customer service, outstanding people and growth through mergers and acquisitions. In 1852, the company was founded to meet customers' express and banking business needs. Today, it is the fourth largest bank holding company and is recognized as one of North America's premier financial services providers. With \$339 billion in assets, the company operates over 5,600 retail stores and 6,735 ATM's in 23 states to serve its 24 million customers. It is the oldest and largest bank headquartered in California.

The client has also been recognized as a leader by several financial magazines. Fortune has ranked the company among the top 10% of America's "Most Admired" companies for the second consecutive year. Global Finance Magazine has ranked the client the best and safest bank in the US for the second consecutive year.

In 1998, the client merged with another bank. With the merger of equals, they took the best of both companies to create a new culture, vision, and set of core values. Management was no longer driven by the "numbers" alone - they knew their people needed to provide outstanding service to gain a competitive advantage. This massive merger of people and process made it imperative for employees to work together consultatively and as business partners. The following provides an overview of the Human Resources Department's journey to make this cultural shift.

### **HR DEPARTMENT HISTORY**

In the years preceding 2001, the general perception of Human Resources (HR) was a "behind the curtain" group focused on employee relations and crisis management. Because they were seen as primarily an administrative department, HR was not involved in strategic issues, applying HR knowledge to business challenges, and generally was not considered a key business partner. In addition to these perceptions, the department felt underutilized, unappreciated, and stereotyped as crisis managers. Aside from internal departmental problems and perceptions, the company was in the midst of working through the details and transition of the merger with Norwest. As a result they experienced difficulty in meeting sales goals, retention issues, and team member engagement issues. Within the department, team members had been working in silos there were those who provided general HR support and those who recruited. Due to geography, focus, and time HR support and recruiting did not intertwine. The respective functions were excellent at solving their own problems and developing solutions, however, they did not partner with other shared service groups to reach optimum results and avoid redundancy. Most team members adept in HR knowledge, employee relations, and/or recruiting--recognized that in order to take the next step to business partner there was a need to develop their consulting skills.

### **THE JOURNEY'S MISSION**

In early 2000, the organization set about on a journey to shift the paradigm of HR. The Vice President of HR in the San Francisco Bay Region, was hired to make significant changes in the way HR operated. His marching orders were clear:  
build your department, take the good people you have and make them great, reduce turnover, increase retention, contribute to the bottom line and do it quickly!

In order to embark on this journey, he divided this shift into four major components:

1. Establish a new vision and business case
2. Create a new structure that focused on partnering
3. Develop the skills and knowledge of the HR team
4. Build better relationships with clients to better understand their needs

### **RESULTS FROM THE JOURNEY**

## Specific Skills and Knowledge that Made a Significant Difference

In January of 2003, Advance Consulting met with the HR team and asked them what truly made a difference in their ability to make such great leaps in how they worked and added value to their clients. Here is what they said:

### 1. A New Way Of Thinking

- Broadening one's perspective. The training incorporated knowledge, skills, techniques and tools from a host of fields: psychology, project management, sales, communication, neuro-linguistic programming, anthropology, coaching, management, and more.
- Playing a variety of consultative roles. We are now able to serve in a variety of different roles from technical expert, coach, and facilitator to problem solver, administrator, influencer, strategist, and partner. We are skilled and flexible enough to operate in all of these roles at any given time and also use team members to play specific roles as needed.
- Not solving the problem for our clients. Slowing down and having a conversation in which we asked a lot of probing "WHAT " questions instead of solving the problem for them. If our inquiring strategy was on target, our clients would often solve the problem themselves. As a result they saw us in a new light and the value we added to their business challenges.
- We are our own worst enemy. We realized we were giving the clients fish to eat every day instead of teaching them to fish for themselves. We now coach and teach our clients to use company tools and resources to solve problems (e.g. hotline for benefit questions, contacting appropriate parties for information). The difference allows HR to provide more added value and enables us to be a better strategic business partner.

### 2. Skills In Managing Client Interactions

- Ask versus tell. By focusing on asking versus telling we are able to determine what the client's needs are and how we can help them vs. telling them something they don't want to hear.
- Question to understand their needs and opinions/ frame of reference. We now ask value-based questions – WHAT versus WHY and peel the onion to get to the real need.
- Listen to the answers and ASK again. Listening has shifted dramatically from using that time to think of a response to truly listening to what they have to say.
- Offer recommendations and options.  
We used to tell clients what to do, now we offer the recommendations and options, lay out the pros and cons and let them know it is their business and they will need to make the decision.
- Treat each client uniquely. Analyze the client's personality, language, opinion/frame of reference, and task approach.

We now take the time to look at each client as a unique person and develop a strategy for working with them. Using Advance Consulting's tools made a huge difference in our ability to do this analysis.

- Influence the client based on what is important and relevant.

Influencing clients using the Expertise Statement model-- What is my experience?, What have I learned from that experience?, and How does it apply to the client and this situation?

The most critical part – How is it relevant to the client?

### **3. The Entire Team Using A Consultative Process That Is Flexible And User Friendly**

- A flexible process that focuses on collaboration, involving customers and partners, and ensuring expectations and success measures are clear. Before we would have been bogged down in the flavor of the month with no measure of effectiveness and no involvement from our clients. Now, we make sure everyone is on board, we have a business goal and are clear about our success criteria.
- Building trust and commitment throughout the HR team.

A sense of real mutual respect, confidentiality, appreciation of our conversations, programs, and new approach has resulted through this process.

### **CLIENT'S AND HR'S ASSESSMENT OF THE CHANGE**

#### **Client's Assessment of the Change**

Recently, senior managers were surveyed on what behavioral changes they saw within the HR department:

- HR is collaborative and no longer the police.
- HR is business focused and can hold their own in a business conversation.
- HR is always invited to the table and is included in all planning and management meetings.
- HR is flexible and truly is there to help them meet their business goals.
- HR contributes to the overall success of the business.
- HR's approach is more consulting oriented and less telling.
- HR is more proactive in reaching out to the managers and team members.
- Managers are seeking more input from HR on general business and organizational issues.

#### **HR's Assessment of the Change:**

The HR team reports the change in the following way:

- We are involved in day-to-day business issues and solutions.
- We increased job satisfaction and feel more valued.
- We increased opportunities to learn as a group and individually
- We moved from living in emotion to be consciously competent and knowing.
- We moved from reacting to a platform that allows them to do great work.

#### **For the leader:**

- We are truly a team, before we were just a group of people.
- There has been a significant increase in consulting, influencing, and collaboration skills as well as business acumen.

- HR is now the champion of any change initiative versus dragging their feet.
- We now provide value added reports and analysis and we are better able to summarize and offer solutions to solve the issues.
- I can ask anyone on the team to take on any project and it will be successful.
- The team has transformed themselves into the very best.

### **KEY LEARNINGS FROM THE JOURNEY:**

In looking back on the HR Department's journey, the team expressed the following learnings:

1. Do not set expectations too early within the organization. It is important to wait until you are ready. It is also important to implement the four components before you truly commit to a new way of working. Once you are ready to work differently, create a demo project that you can be successful at.
2. Alignment with the vision and values of senior leadership. If you are not aligned with the organization's culture, vision and values, it is a much harder road to travel.
3. Communicate to all other partners. It is important to help your partners, other shared services, vendors, etc. to understand your new vision and value proposition. Influence your partners to collaborate with you on this journey, help them to also work consultatively. In the past our training and development organization told us what training they offered and most did not meet our needs. Now we collaborate with them to set the schedules and training based on the region's needs.
4. Assess, restructure, move out and develop the team. It is critical to assess the team and make sure you have the right people in place. Do not base your structure on the people you have, but take time to assess and restructure and match people to the right positions and develop the team. Continuous development and sharing of best practices must be ongoing. And communication throughout the process is paramount.
5. Make the processes for working with you very simple. In the past, a team member was hired and never guaranteed that they would get training on a regular basis. We simplified our process and now immediately schedule them for training during the New Hire Orientation.
6. Get help from other groups or outside vendors. When changing the way people work, it is important to use your resources. The team received assistance from compensation services, employee relations, employee assistance, the legal department, and Advance Consulting to make their shift happen.
7. Celebrate successes and continue to build the team. It is important to take the time to acknowledge and recognize our progress and achievements. By celebrating progress we build our team.