



Words of Wisdom

Are you just starting out on your higher ed HR career path? Could you use some good, solid advice from a seasoned professional in the field? Here's the scoop from six senior HR leaders, offering their perspectives on what it takes to grow as a professional and succeed as a leader in the always unique and sometimes challenging world of higher education human resources.

What I Wish I Knew Then

Q What is one thing you know now that you wish you'd known when you first began your career in higher education human resources?



I wish I had known at the outset just how important change management skills are in this sector. Those who are unfamiliar with our world think “stability” — higher ed has been higher ed for centuries, and its mission (to educate) has never changed and will never change. While I suppose that statement is true on the most basic level, it’s far from the truth in many other ways. Today, higher ed as a whole (and its business model) is in a state of flux, and the higher education workplace is very different than it was even 25 years ago. As HR professionals, having skills that will enable us to roll with the punches and to coach and help lead our institutions through significant change is of the utmost importance. — *Isaac Dixon, CUPA-HR board member and associate vice president and director of human resources, Lewis & Clark College*



How important it is to truly understand the “business” of higher education. From a strategic standpoint, HR’s value increases exponentially when we demonstrate conversant comfort around the “connective tissues” of higher ed — diversity of funding sources, competitive student enrollment challenges, creative faculty workload agreements, the dynamic nature of academic programming, foundation work/endowments/giving, revenue generating potential, budgetary costing models and practices, impacts of current and potential legislative mandates and regulations, workforce design ... the list goes on.

Until we can speak cogently about these topics and demonstrate recognition of their impact on institutional stability and workforce management programs and designs, HR’s credibility (and our own individual credibility) as a strategic partner will remain tethered to the customer service model that is all about the transactional processes and regulatory compliance which, although important, remain anchors tied tightly

to HR’s bow. Remember, agility and creativity begin with knowing how and when to pull the anchor. — *Mary Maher, former chair of the CUPA-HR board of directors and assistant vice president for human resources, University of Baltimore*

Climbing the Career Ladder

Q What are some of the must-have competencies for moving up the higher ed HR career ladder?



I think one of the most important competencies needed in order to advance in any career, but especially in human resources, is a commitment to building and developing yourself and others. As I have advanced in my career, I have made it a point to stay active in learning and to encourage those around me to do the same. It’s all too easy to get comfortable in our positions and let changes to the profession pass us by. And while we of course need to stay current in our specific functional areas, we also need to become proficient in critical thinking and interaction skills, which are imperative for anyone wishing to be seen as a leader.

The ability to think critically and demonstrate self-awareness is invaluable when leading teams, and building strong relationships and cultural competence serves to help us influence and be part of helping to steer our institution’s strategic direction. As you advance in your career, you will increasingly need to demonstrate your ability to develop those around you. The greatest thing we can do for others is to help them achieve their potential. — *David Blake, CUPA-HR Western Region board member and assistant vice president for human resources, Oregon State University*



Moving up the ladder in HR requires more than being a subject matter expert. You do have to know your “stuff,” but you also have to be attuned to the business of your institution in particular and higher education in general. This level of HEHR sophistication can only be acquired through networking with colleagues outside as well as inside of HR, reading

everything you can get your hands on about trends in higher education, and building professional relationships over time.

You have to love the work you do, be an active and avid listener, and care about the people with whom you work. Most of us don't go into human resources (especially in higher education) because we want to make a lot of money. We do it because we can make a difference. As Oliver Wendell Holmes wrote, "Greatness is not in where we stand, but in what direction we are moving. We must sail sometimes with the wind and sometimes against it – but sail we must, and not drift, nor lie at anchor." – **Lynn Bynum, chair of the CUPA-HR board of directors and chief human resources officer, Bellarmine University**

Characteristics of a Great Supervisor

Q What makes a truly exceptional supervisor?



A great supervisor approaches managing people with empathy and understanding. This doesn't mean you need to be a "softie," but an excellent manager knows that managing people is very much like raising children.

When your charges do something well, you praise them, reward them and reinforce the good behaviors. When they do something wrong, you let them know, offer suggestions as to how they might do it better, and let them know that you care about them getting it right.

The best supervisor I ever had constantly gave feedback — after practically every meeting or event. He would let you know the three things you did well and the one thing you could do better. He would also actively solicit my feedback on his performance and his work. He used to tell me "all feedback is a gift," and I now know that he was so right.

Finally, the truly exceptional supervisors I've come across in my career provide folks with clear expectations and stretch assignments. People generally thrive if they feel they are contributing to the mission of the organization, learning and growing, and feel accountable for the process and the outcomes. Great supervisors set a high bar and expect strong performance. – **Lianne Sullivan-Crowley, CUPA-HR board member and vice president for human resources, Princeton University**



Throughout my career, I've had many great bosses, and a few not-so-great ones. In addition to learning from and emulating the exceptional ones, I also made it a point to take away some "what-not-to-dos" from the less than stellar ones. In my experience, great

bosses believe in (and practice) shared accountability. They know that humor is necessary and appreciated. They are always willing to jump in, roll up their sleeves and do what is necessary to help their team succeed (including "taking one for the team" if need be).

Great supervisors encourage, demonstrate and foster an environment of continued learning — keeping ahead of the curve and anticipating the challenges and opportunities that are imminent. They also hire right, taking into account an individual's skills and motivation (and not just experience) and actively recruiting the talent needed to take the team or organization where it needs to go. They realize that learning is 360 and are always open to learning from their team members. They create opportunities for new and different ideas to emerge and then help to cultivate those ideas. Great supervisors also show appreciation, foster collaboration, and are present, accessible and supportive. – **Pamela Prescod-Caesar, chair-elect of the CUPA-HR Eastern Region board of directors and vice president for human resources, Swarthmore College**

CUPA-HR is currently developing several resources for young and early career professionals and those new to higher education human resources. Keep an eye on the CUPA-HR website (www.cupahr.org) for details.