

How Data and Strong HR Values Can Help Leaders Buckle Up for What's Ahead

HR Executive | Cliff Stevenson | April 10, 2025



In my years of experience, I've never known an HR department that has won a popularity contest, no matter how good its work. Then again, most of us didn't get into HR in hopes of being the cool kid. However, now it feels like the core concepts guiding our HR work are being attacked.

Here's where I'm coming from: We just spent two or so long years responding to and dealing with the many workforce issues that arose during COVID. Then, after a brief respite, we're back in the hot seat as DEI and other workforce-related policies come under fire, and the economic outlook is again uncertain at best.

Certainly, no one can foresee what's ahead for us in the coming months, let alone the next couple of years. However, HR leaders can take actions now that will preserve the integrity of their teams, maintain workforce resilience and continue to serve their businesses—all while defending the profession.

Strong HR values require investing time and resources in data

In my mind, one of the most important actions for now is to invest time, staff resources and dollars into developing a stockpile of clean, accurate, well-managed and relevant workforce data. This work is critical for multiple reasons.

First, you'll need data to drive the kind of business and workforce decisions that are bound to come up in times of change or uncertainty. Whether your company is considering workforce reductions, the elimination of key benefits or programs or a major reorganization, you will need data to ensure the actions will serve the end goals.

For instance, data might show how a decision to temporarily reduce senior staffing in a customer-facing role could immediately impact customer retention and critical add-on sales.

Second, data collected and analyzed over time will help you justify current programs and investments, identify where changes might be needed and even identify issues before they become problematic. Solid data will take the emotion out of decisions and support those that best align with the intended goals.

Our survey results show that when HR organizations regularly share data with executive leaders and other stakeholders, they are more likely to be viewed as strategic.

Finally, we all know AI is only going to have an increasing impact on our work and businesses. So, even if your organization is only now using the most basic AI—such as Grammarly or ChatGPT—the more you focus on generating, storing and managing relevant data, the better off you'll be when you're ready to take advantage of advanced AI capabilities. Investments in analytic tools, trained staff and governance processes will definitely pay off in the near future.

Keep using what works to foster strong HR values

It's also important to continue those programs that you know are yielding positive business results. While DEI is a major target for many politicians, those of us in HR know that when designed and executed well, processes that foster diversity, equity and inclusion bring benefits to employees and businesses. Whether it's equitable pay for men and women, transparent pay and leave practices, equal access to job or promotion opportunities, or employee feedback programs—data shows over and over again it pays to incorporate these values in HR and business practices.

For instance, in our 2024-25 HR Systems Survey, when respondents reported high levels of pay equity across the organization, their companies had significantly higher outcomes in competitive advantage, customer satisfaction, organizational innovation, market share, profitability and customer retention. We saw a similar pattern for those respondents who reported highly inclusive workplace cultures supported by leadership.

Create a variety of backup plans

As the economic outlook becomes grimmer and scarier, it will be increasingly common for companies to consider workforce reductions and budget cuts. When this happens, one of our main roles is to prevent hasty, unsupported decisions. I know I wasn't the only one who watched in horror as thousands of federal workers were fired—without any management input or planning—solely based on having a probationary code next to their name.

We must help our senior leaders make informed decisions rather than knee-jerk reactions. Therefore, we recommend investing time and resources in workforce and scenario planning backed with supporting data. Even if your company isn't anticipating the need for any foreseeable changes, having plans in your back pocket ranging from "best case" to "worst case" will help prepare you and your company for whatever is ahead. Plus, you might sleep better at night.

Finally, we have to lean on each other. Whether it's calling up a peer to brainstorm ideas or making the time to go to a conference, use your networks and leverage professional resources for inspiration, practical advice and even informal therapy. I fear we're about to enter yet another time for which there is no playbook. But, just as we got through the COVID pandemic, we can find a way through the months and years ahead by sharing our experiences and showing up as best we can for employees and colleagues.