

How HR Can Strike a Balance Between People and Performance Priorities

HR Brew | Mikaela Cohen | April 17, 2025

“Humans have a variety of needs, and then organizations have needs as well. And, it doesn’t have to be an either/or decision between your people and their performance. It can actually be a both/and.”



Emily Parsons

People leaders are constantly wrestling with the three Ps of their job: People, processes, and performance. That’s why it makes sense on occasion if one gets more attention than another.

But the Ps of the people profession shouldn’t be an “either/or” option, it should be “both/and,” according to Jeff Smith, chief product officer at the performance management platform 15Five and author of *The Meaningful Manager: How to Manage What Matters*.

Smith shared with HR Brew how people leaders can strike a balance between the three Ps and more insights from his 2022 book.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity.

What will HR pros learn from your book?

Many organizations were having to make a choice between people and performance, and, at 15Five, we found that that doesn't have to be an either/or. It can actually be a both/and, and the book is really about how to bring that together.

One of the unexpected things there, too, is that because many people's [motivations] do include the idea of achievement or growth, they actually want to perform...They want to see the impact that they make on a day-to-day, week-to-week basis on your business, on the customers, on their stakeholders. So, this choice between people and performance is really a false choice, and it can be a both/and. I think that's actually more relevant today, maybe even more than it was a few years ago.

You mentioned measuring human potential. How can HR pros measure that?

One way that you measure it is you use a collection of instruments that come from things like positive psychology, humanistic psychology, where you're really looking across [employees'] needs being met, psychological safety and autonomy, and then looking for whether needs are met related to things like hope and whether people get to use their strengths at work.

So, for our readers, if they're meeting the needs of their workforce, providing a psychologically safe environment, is that the best way to position their employees to reach their full potential?

Yeah, basically. An organization should look at the performance of their people alongside things like their security needs, their growth needs, to determine whether you're really meeting the needs of the organization and the employee, and there's a little bit of a balancing act there.

To me, and to us at 15Five, finding that right combination of what you're looking for with regard to performance and engagement leads to the greatest likelihood of long-term success for an organization.

How do you recommend HR leaders use the "both/and" approach when discussing, for example, return-to-office plans?

For something like return-to-office, or any of these programs, I think that one of the things that can trip organizations up is that they lose track of what they're hoping to accomplish. So, like, what's the "Why?" behind something like return-to-office? And, it's like, "Well, how can we be sure our people are even working and not just doing laundry or whatever they do at home?"

And, what you're really looking for is, "How effective are our people, and how efficient is our business?" And, you should start with a deep understanding of what's actually happening in your business, and what you want to accomplish, and what's in your way of doing that.