

LEADERSHIP

Before You Replace an HR Leader, Reassess What the Organization Needs

A vacancy creates urgency. It should also create a reason to look at the role again.

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When an HR leader leaves, most organizations move quickly to replace them. Someone finds the existing job description, updates a few lines, and starts talking about candidates.

I understand the urgency. The work does not stop because the position is vacant. Employees still need support. Managers still need guidance. Payroll, benefits, hiring, compliance, and employee issues continue whether there is an HR leader in the seat or not.

But reaching for the old job description can create another problem. It assumes the position the organization had is still the position it needs.

That is not always true.

The business may have grown. The employee population may be larger or spread across more locations. The leadership team may expect more from HR than it did when the role was originally designed. Systems may no longer support the volume or complexity of the work. The HR team may also be spending so much time keeping up with daily needs that no one has been able to step back and address what is not working.

Before opening the search, I would want leadership to answer a few questions.

What was the HR leader actually responsible for?

What has changed in the organization?

What needs to be different over the next year or two?

What authority, resources, and support will the next person have to make that happen?

Those answers are more useful than starting with a list of qualifications.

Look beyond what is written on paper

An HR job description usually captures the formal responsibilities of the role. It rarely captures everything the person was carrying.

The former leader may have been the only person who understood certain processes. Managers may have relied on that person to resolve routine issues. Important decisions may have been made through informal conversations instead of a defined process. There may be work sitting within HR simply because no other function took ownership of it.

None of that is unusual, but it matters when deciding what comes next.

If one person was holding together several disconnected processes, hiring another person into the same structure will not fix the underlying problem. It may only restart the cycle.

This is where leadership teams need to be candid about the role. Was the HR leader expected to build strategy, or mostly respond to immediate issues? Was there time to improve the function, or was the position constantly pulled into daily administration? Did leaders want a strategic partner but continue to treat HR as a service desk?

The answers may be uncomfortable, but they are necessary.

Be clear about the assignment

“Strategic HR leader” appears in nearly every executive HR posting. It can mean very different things depending on the organization.

For one company, it may mean building basic HR infrastructure and creating consistency across locations. For another, it may mean leading workforce planning, organizational design, leadership development, or a major technology implementation. In some organizations, the first priority is much more fundamental: stabilize the function, reduce risk, and make sure important work is being completed accurately.

All of those needs are legitimate. The problem comes when the organization describes one assignment and hires the person into another.

A candidate may be told that the role will focus on strategy, then discover that most of the HR processes are manual, employee records are incomplete, policies are outdated, and managers need significant day to day support. Another candidate may be hired for strong operational experience when the executive team actually needs someone who can challenge decisions, influence direction, and lead organizational change.

Neither person is necessarily the wrong HR leader. The assignment was not clear.

Before recruiting begins, leadership should agree on what the person must accomplish during the first twelve to twenty four months. Not a list of twenty responsibilities. The few outcomes that will determine whether the person is successful.

That conversation should drive the level of the role, the experience required, the reporting relationship, and the compensation.

Consider what the next leader will inherit

The strength of the HR team matters just as much as the strength of the candidate.

A new leader cannot operate at an executive level if the role is also expected to personally carry every administrative detail. If the team lacks capacity, processes are unclear, or the technology creates more work than it solves, those conditions need to be acknowledged during the search.

The same is true for executive access.

If leadership wants HR involved in business decisions, the HR leader needs to be included while those decisions are being shaped. Bringing HR in afterward to manage the employee impact is not strategic partnership. It is cleanup.

Organizations should also consider whether every responsibility currently assigned to the position should remain there. The vacancy may reveal an opportunity to redistribute work, strengthen the existing team, use outside expertise in a targeted way, or redesign parts of the function before the permanent leader arrives.

Sometimes the right answer is to refill the position largely as it was.

Sometimes it is not.

A transition period can be useful

A vacant leadership role does not mean the organization has to choose between rushing the search and allowing the work to sit.

An interim leader or experienced advisor can provide continuity while also taking a closer look at the function. That may include identifying immediate risks, documenting processes, reviewing the team structure, clarifying decision ownership, and helping leadership define what the permanent role should accomplish.

This period often reveals things that were difficult to see while everyone was focused on keeping up.

It also gives the organization a better story to tell candidates. Strong HR leaders will want to understand what they are walking into. They will ask about the team, the systems, leadership expectations, decision making, and the condition of the function. Clear answers build credibility.

Vague answers create concern.

Do not let urgency make the decision

An HR leadership vacancy can feel disruptive, particularly when the previous leader held significant institutional knowledge or served as the primary resource for difficult employee matters.

Even so, filling the position quickly should not be the only measure of progress.

The better measure is whether the organization understands what it needs, has designed the role around that need, and is prepared to support the person selected.

I would not begin the search until leadership can explain the assignment clearly. Candidates should not have to piece it together during the interview process, and the new leader should not discover after joining that the expectations were never aligned.

Replacing an HR leader is a hiring decision.

It is also an operating decision about how the organization wants its people function to work.

That deserves more than an updated job description.

Considering an HR leadership transition?

Kompact Advisory works with organizations to evaluate the current HR function, clarify what leadership is needed next, and create a practical path forward.

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