Ulrich HR Model

For many years, the human resources department was seen mainly as a place for paperwork, payroll and rules. In his 1997 book Human Resource Champions, Dave Ulrich argued that HR should be judged by what it delivers, not only by what it does. He described four roles that HR professionals must play at the same time. The roles sit on two axes: a strategic focus on the future versus an operational focus on daily work, and a focus on processes versus a focus on people. Together, these roles help HR add real value to the business.

1. Strategic Partner

The strategic partner role combines a focus on the future with a focus on processes. Here, HR works closely with senior leaders to turn business strategy into HR plans. It asks which skills, structures and people the company will need to reach its goals. HR then aligns hiring, training and rewards with that strategy. In this role, HR has a real seat at the decision-making table.

Example: a football coach plans next season's squad around the style of play the club wants.

At work: Faris, the HR manager of a growing logistics company, joins the planning meeting for a new warehouse. He works out how many drivers and supervisors will be needed, and when to start hiring them.

2. Change Agent

The change agent role combines a focus on the future with a focus on people. Organisations must change to survive, but people often resist change they do not understand. HR helps managers explain why change is needed and prepares employees for new ways of working. It also builds a culture that can adapt, learn and renew itself. In short, HR makes change happen through people, not just through announcements.

Example: a school head who involves teachers and parents before introducing a new timetable meets less resistance.

At work: when the company moves to a new tracking system, Faris sets up short workshops and asks team leaders to share early successes. Staff worries fall, and the new system is used quickly.

3. Administrative Expert

The administrative expert role combines a focus on daily work with a focus on processes. It covers the core HR work: payroll, contracts, records, recruitment steps and compliance with the law. Ulrich stressed that this work must be efficient, accurate and low in cost. Clear

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processes, simple forms and good technology free up time for more valuable work. When the basics fail, HR quickly loses the trust it needs for its other roles.

Example: a well-run clinic books appointments online, so patients wait less and staff make fewer mistakes.

At work: Faris replaces paper leave forms with a simple online system. Requests are approved in one day instead of one week, and payroll errors drop.

4. Employee Champion

The employee champion role combines a focus on daily work with a focus on people. HR listens to employees, brings their concerns to management and makes sure they are treated fairly. It also works to build commitment, so that people want to give their best. This means caring about workload, wellbeing, growth and recognition. Committed employees serve customers better, so this role supports business results too.

Example: a team captain who speaks up for tired players helps the whole team perform better.

At work: Faris notices that the night-shift drivers feel ignored. He holds regular listening sessions with them, and the company improves their rest areas and schedules.

5. From Four Roles to Three Pillars

Ulrich's ideas also changed the way many HR departments are organised. Many large companies built a structure with three pillars, often called the Ulrich model. HR business partners work with business leaders on strategy and change. Centres of expertise provide specialist knowledge in areas such as rewards, learning and talent. Shared services handle routine transactions efficiently, often in one central team.

At work: as the company grows, Faris becomes the HR business partner for operations. He relies on a rewards specialist for pay questions, and on the shared service centre for payroll.

Conclusion

In summary, the Ulrich HR model shows that HR must deliver value in four roles at once. The strategic partner and the change agent look to the future, while the administrative expert and the employee champion keep daily work running well. The model reminds HR teams to balance processes with people. No single role is enough on its own; the real strength comes from combining all four. When HR plays all four roles well, it becomes a true partner in the success of the business.

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