



FEATURE



## Building Your Career in Human Resources: Walking the Tightrope

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Most articles on human resources address what someone in HR should or shouldn't do or how to find HR jobs. However, very few articles on human resources deal with building a career in the field. In contrast, this article deals with a real problem of human resources professionals: how to walk the tightrope.

Human resources professionals develop and execute policies and procedures concerning employees. Most people in human resources start out as HR administrators or HR executive assistants and then move into advisory roles followed by operational human resources management and strategic human resources management. Throughout this journey, the human resources professional's job is to make the workplace more comfortable and more productive by satisfying the needs of both employers and employees. It is this dual allegiance of the human resources professional that creates the situation we call "walking the tightrope."

Walking the tightrope is part of the everyday reality of human resources work. It occurs when the human resources professional tries to serve both managers and rank-and-file employees with the same passion. Especially when adversarial relationships exist between employers and employees in an organization, the dual allegiance of the human resources professional can lead to conflicts and push him or her into a tight spot. If the situation does not get managed properly, it can turn one's career into a mess. While employees may hate the human resources professional because they consider him or her a puppet of

management, managers may feel disgusted with the human resources professional for giving in too easily to employee demands.

Neither of these views will bolster the career of the human resources professional. So how should he or she tackle this key challenge?

Research shows that to walk the human resources tightrope successfully it is necessary to gain self-knowledge, which involves defining one's values and setting boundaries.

For the human resources professional, there are two easy ways by which such knowledge can be gained: through introspection and by continually asking for honest feedback from peers and superiors.

Gaining self-knowledge will assist the human resources professional with avoiding actions that displease either employees or managers. The human resources professional consciously needs to develop a yardstick that gauges the extent to which values can be compromised.

However, clarity comes with experience and with the understanding that one is expected

to do one's job and not expected to please everybody—that may be desirable, but it is not part of the job. To perform well in human resources, one must be ready to deal with value conflicts and to deal with them properly. To avoid damaging your career, you will need to:

- be knowledgeable about your own values
- understand the priorities of your organization
- determine how well the priorities of your organization match your own values, career goals, job goals, and preferences
- work around personal priorities to align them with organizational priorities

More than in any other field of work, personnel in human resources need to remain aloof from staff who might influence their decision-making capabilities. However, if the pressure to change personal priorities becomes too great, the human resources professional should try to switch departments or divisions while remaining with the same employer. Quitting should be the last resort.