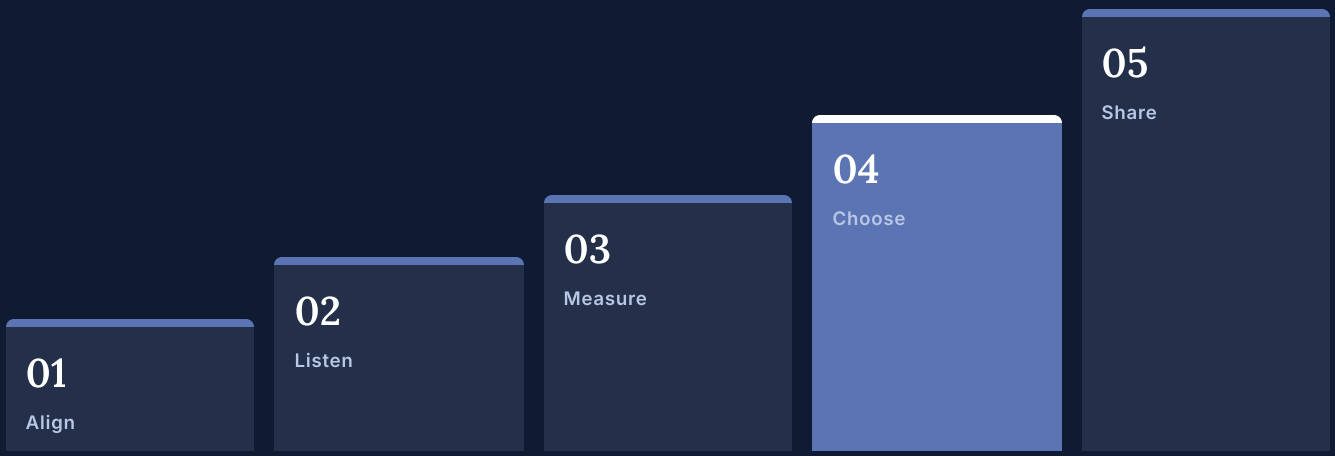
Herrera
HR GROWTH PARTNERS

FOUNDER FIELD GUIDE

THE PEOPLE STRATEGY PLAYBOOK

You have a plan for sales, product and cash. *What's your plan for people?*

How growing companies build a simple, practical people strategy that supports the business plan, and the HR foundation it needs to work.



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A NOTE BEFORE YOU START

Every part of your business plan depends on people carrying it out. Yet most growing companies plan their hiring one requisition at a time and their culture not at all.

A people strategy doesn't need to be a thick binder or a big program. For most companies under 250 employees, it's one page: the few people priorities that will make or break this year's plan, who owns them and how you'll know they're working.

This playbook shows how to build that page, and how to make sure the HR basics underneath it are solid enough to hold it up.

Peter Herrera

Founder, Herrera HR Growth Partners

SECTION 01

What a people strategy is, and isn't

A people strategy is your plan for attracting, developing and keeping the people you need to reach your business goals. It answers: what will our people need to do, and what do we need to do for them?

Common answers that miss the point

"That's an HR thing."
It starts with the business plan, so leadership owns it.

"Keeping people happy."
Engagement matters, but the goal is performance and growth.

"Our hiring plan."
Headcount is one piece. Development and retention matter just as much.

	PEOPLE STRATEGY	HR OPERATIONS
Focus	Where the company is going, and the people it needs to get there	Running the basics accurately: payroll, benefits, compliance, records
Owner	Founders and leadership, with HR guiding	HR, operations or a provider
Time frame	The next 12 to 24 months	This pay period, this enrollment, this filing
Measured by	Hiring against plan, retention of key people, manager quality, engagement	Accuracy, timeliness, compliance

You need both

A great strategy on a shaky foundation fails: late paychecks, missing policies and compliance gaps erode trust faster than any engagement program builds it. And smooth operations with no strategy leave you reacting to every resignation and hiring scramble.

SECTION 02

Check your foundation

Before you optimize, make sure the basics are working. Mark what's in place today.

PAY AND RECORDS

- [ ] Payroll and time tracking that's accurate and on time
- [ ] An HR system for employee records and self-service
- [ ] Correct worker classification

COMPLIANCE

- [ ] A current handbook with signed acknowledgments
- [ ] Required postings, notices and training
- [ ] I-9s and records stored correctly

BENEFITS

- [ ] Plans, enrollment and required notices
- [ ] A clear explanation employees understand

TALENT

- [ ] Job descriptions and pay ranges
- [ ] A consistent hiring process
- [ ] Onboarding with a 30-60-90 plan
- [ ] A performance review process
- [ ] Training for managers

EMPLOYEE RELATIONS

- [ ] A way to raise concerns, and a process to investigate them
- [ ] A consistent approach to discipline and terminations

LISTENING

- [ ] Regular one-on-ones
- [ ] Surveys or stay interviews

> **Compliance is part of culture**
>
> Fair, consistent treatment, a safe way to raise concerns and paychecks that are always right are what make people trust the company. That trust is what the rest of your strategy is built on.

Scoring: count your checks out of 17. Below 12 usually means the foundation needs work before strategy can stick. See **The HR Compliance Field Guide** for a deeper compliance check.

What “good enough” looks like at each stage

You don’t need everything at once. Build in steps as you grow, and get ahead of the next stage before you reach it.

STAGE	PEOPLE PRIORITIES	COMMON BREAKING POINTS
1–15 employees	Payroll and classification right; offer letters and basic policies; founder-led hiring and one-on-ones; clear values	Contractors who should be employees; handshake deals on pay; no written expectations
16–50 employees	A handbook; pay ranges; structured hiring; first managers trained; a light review cycle; a benefits strategy	Founder still handling every people issue; first-time managers with no support; inconsistent pay
51–100 employees	Career paths; engagement surveys; FMLA and ACA compliance; documented performance management; leadership team development	Culture drifts as new layers form; good people leave without warning; compliance gaps appear
101–250 employees	Workforce planning; succession for key roles; people data and reporting; multi-state compliance; a dedicated HR leader	Silos and handoffs slow everything down; manager quality varies widely; HR is purely reactive

Signs you’ve outgrown founder-led HR

- The founder spends hours a week on people issues
- Managers ask “what are we supposed to do here?”
- Two people doing the same job are treated differently
- A resignation or complaint caught you off guard

Signs your coordination is breaking

- Work stalls between teams
- No one’s sure who owns what
- Your best people are buried in meetings and messages

See **The Coordination Tax**.

The cost of waiting

People problems compound. A pay inconsistency at 20 employees becomes a pay equity problem at 80. A manager who was never trained at 30 people is leading a team of 12 at 100. The cheapest time to build the foundation is a stage before you need it.

SECTION 03

Build your strategy in five steps

Plan for about four to six weeks the first time. After that, it's a quarterly check-in and a yearly refresh.

STEP 1

Align with leadership

Start with the business plan, not HR. In a two-hour leadership session, answer:

- What must be true by the end of next year for the plan to succeed?
- Which capabilities, roles or leaders will that require that we don't have today?
- Which people risks could derail it: a key person leaving, slow hiring, weak managers?
- What do we want it to feel like to work here, and are our values written down and used?

STEP 2

Listen to employees

People support what they help shape. Use a short anonymous survey, a few small-group conversations or stay interviews. Ask:

- What makes this a good place to work? What gets in the way of doing your best work?
- Do you see a future for yourself here? What would make that more likely?

STEP 3

Look at the numbers

You don't need sophisticated analytics. A simple spreadsheet tells you a lot.

MEASURE	WHAT IT TELLS YOU
Turnover, total and regretted	Whether you're losing people you wanted to keep, and where
Tenure patterns	Whether people leave at a predictable point, such as month 6 or year 2
Time to fill and offer acceptance	Whether hiring can keep up with the plan
Engagement or survey scores	How people feel, and how it's trending by team
Performance spread	Where your strongest and weakest areas are
Pay position and equity	Whether pay is competitive and fair
Manager span	Whether any manager has too many direct reports to lead well

Why it pays off

Organizations with a supportive culture are 71% more likely to see productivity gains, 54% more likely to see better retention and 28% more likely to see revenue growth (Lighthouse Research & Advisory, 2025). Measuring where you stand is how you start building one deliberately.

STEP 4

Choose three priorities, not ten

Using what you learned, pick the three people priorities that matter most to the business plan this year. For each one, define:

- **The goal:** what will be different in 12 months
- **The actions:** two to four concrete steps
- **The owner:** one name, not a team
- **The measure:** how you'll know it's working
- **The budget:** time and money required

Example priorities

PRIORITY	ACTIONS	MEASURE
Hire 12 engineers without lowering the bar	Scorecards for each role; structured interviews; referral push; interviewer training	Time to fill under 45 days; 90% of hires meeting expectations at 6 months
Build our first layer of managers	Manager training cohort; weekly one-on-ones; quarterly 360 feedback	Manager scores on the engagement survey; regretted turnover by team
Keep the people who know our biggest clients	Stay interviews; career paths for account leads; pay review against market	Zero regretted departures among account leads
Get compliance ready for 50+ employees	FMLA and ACA readiness; handbook update; leave process	Audit items closed before we cross 50

STEP 5

Share the plan, and keep sharing it

Employees want to know where the company is going and how they fit in. Tell them early and often.

- Present the three priorities at an all-hands, with the reasons behind them, and share what you heard from employees
- Have managers discuss what they mean for each team
- Connect individual goals to the priorities during reviews
- Report progress every quarter, including what isn't working
- Never promise more than you can deliver

Start smaller than you think

An overly ambitious plan that stalls does more harm than a modest one that works. If you can only do one thing well this year, pick the priority closest to your biggest business risk and do it properly.

Common mistakes

Copying a big company	Programs built for 5,000 people collapse at 50. Borrow ideas, not structures.
HR writes it alone	Without leadership ownership, it becomes an HR wish list.
No owner, no date	Priorities without a name and a deadline quietly disappear.
Asking, then ignoring	A survey with no follow-up lowers trust.
Strategy on a shaky base	Fix payroll, compliance and pay fairness first.

Your first six weeks

Weeks 1–2

- Foundation check
- Leadership session

Weeks 3–4

- Employee survey or listening sessions
- Pull the numbers

Weeks 5–6

- Choose three priorities
- Share the plan

SECTION 04

Your one-page people plan

Fill this in with your leadership team. If it doesn't fit on one page, it's too complicated to carry out.

BUSINESS GOAL	The one or two business outcomes this plan supports
MISSION & VALUES	Why we exist, and the three to five behaviors we hire, reward and correct for
WHERE WE ARE	Headcount, key numbers and what employees told us
BIGGEST PEOPLE RISK	The thing most likely to derail the plan
PRIORITY 1	Goal · actions · owner · measure
PRIORITY 2	Goal · actions · owner · measure
PRIORITY 3	Goal · actions · owner · measure
FOUNDATION FIXES	The compliance or operations gaps we'll close this year
BUDGET	People costs, programs and outside support
RHYTHM	When we review progress, and how we'll share it with the team

SECTION 05

Keep it alive

Most people strategies fail quietly. They're written, presented once and never mentioned again.

Live your values

Use them in hiring decisions, recognition and hard calls. Tell one real story at each all-hands that shows a value in action.

Be realistic

Match the plan to your capacity. It's better to finish three things than start ten.

Close the loop

Share survey results and what you're doing about them. Follow through, or people stop telling you the truth.

Support people to succeed

Clear onboarding, documented pay practices and visible career paths turn intentions into experiences.

Measure as you go

Review your measures every quarter, celebrate progress and adjust what isn't working.

Stay flexible

Business plans change. Revisit the people plan whenever the business plan does.

A simple yearly rhythm

Quarterly	Leadership reviews the three priorities and measures; managers check in with their teams; progress shared at the all-hands
Twice a year	Pulse survey; review cycle; stay interviews for key people
Yearly	Refresh the one-page plan with the business plan; pay review; compliance and handbook update

Signs it's working

Leaders talk about people priorities in the same meetings as revenue. Managers can name the three priorities. Regretted departures fall. Hiring keeps pace with the plan. Employees can explain where the company is going and how they fit.

SECTION 06

How I help

This is the core of what a fractional people leader does: senior HR thinking at the leadership table, plus the hands-on work to make it real, without a full-time hire.

THE FIRST 90 DAYS OF A RETAINER

- An HR foundation review, with gaps ranked by risk
- A facilitated leadership session to build your one-page plan
- An employee survey or listening sessions

EVERY QUARTER AFTER THAT

- Owning the people plan with you, quarter by quarter
- Hiring, manager development, performance and retention
- Compliance and employee relations as you grow

20+ years of HR leadership	**4 industries** financial services, healthcare, hospitality and tech	**2 companies** where I built HR from scratch	**1 to 250** employees: the companies I serve



ABOUT PETER HERRERA

I've spent more than 20 years leading HR in financial services, healthcare, hospitality and tech. I was the first HR leader at a five-venue hospitality group, and later built the HR function at a tech company, both times building the people strategy and the foundation under it while the business grew. I'm based in Chicago and work with growing companies across the U.S.

YOUR NEXT STEP

Ready to plan for your people? *Let's start with one page.*

Bring your business plan to a free intro call. We'll talk through the people priorities that matter most for the year ahead.

FREE 20-MINUTE INTRO CALL

What you'll leave with

- Your biggest people risk for the year ahead
- The foundation gaps to close first
- How a monthly retainer would work for a company your size

No pitch deck, no obligation. If you don't need me, I'll tell you.

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