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The destructive forces of human resources – turning people management and development initiatives into positive impactors

Neville Pritchard
Managing Director, INL Consultancy Ltd

Over the past 10 years we have seen a growth in human resource mini functions, where related responsibilities have grown in individual significance, often independent of each other.

A lack of co-ordinated people related support, defensiveness and self justification, lack of consequence management, lack of collaboration to maximise the impact of people related activity, HR talking to HR, and the following of fads and fashions, have all contributed to a reduction in credibility and contribution. As HR seeks a seat at the top table it may have, through the attempted establishment of its own importance, lost the right to be there. The significance of individual departments within the HR function have increased, however not in the context of the potential and power of a total contribution-and in doing so may have even reduced the overall impact of HR.

Consider a number of HR initiatives in the past few years. Each has had an impact on performance, engagement, capability development and business priorities relating to customers in terms of growth, and/or cost management.

Examples include:

- talent management
- graduate development schemes.
- forced distribution reward and performance management
- top grading.
- offshore development.
- outsourcing
- separating leadership development from organisational development.
- succession planning
- communication management.
- procurement of specialist people services.

Each has some merit when part of a coordinated strategy and clearly aligned and integrated with the organisation strategy.

Each has the power to improve performance, engagement, reputation and capability. Each has the power to disengage, reduce commitment, and increase the number of the living dead (David Bolchover, *The Living Dead*. Capstone 2005). Unfortunately the perception is one where the latter prevails.



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How and why has this happened? What lies behind HR management approaches?

What is the purpose of HR and who do HR play for?

What are the pluses and minuses behind HR related initiatives? What can be done?

In the last decade there have been a number of theories relating to the underlying organisation design of HR. We have seen a drive towards centralisation, a drive towards decentralisation and all manner of hybrid variations. One significant contribution to the current shape of HR was the research and recommendations of David Ulrich, from which came the concept of business partners. In their purest state, the recommendations made, and still make, logical sense. However, the implementation has been of mixed success, largely a result of the underlying agendas of individuals.

We are seeing the creation of specialist mini functions without necessarily the continuing investment in the specialists and the distancing of specialists from the field of play.

We have seen the separation of training, learning and development considerations into a variety of competing and differently perceived support functions.

In each area we have seen an increase in

- ‘solutioneering’ - want driven responses – answers seeking questions can often result in a superficial and ineffective response causing increased future costs as the issue raises again
- quantity rather than quality, a desire to demonstrate activity rather than impact
- the buying of technology ‘handbags’ – systems that are fashionable but often don’t go with the existing wardrobe thus increasing costs as accessories and wardrobes are bought to match the system
- blame avoidance and defensiveness – the tick box approach to HR and its component activity
- restrictive process driven service level agreements
- the dumbing down of contribution and the reduced credibility that follows.

In medical terms, the approach is often similar to the patient meeting the general practitioner and telling the general practitioner the symptoms and pre-deciding the action. The GP then speaks to the specialist who makes a recommendation based purely on the GP discussion with the patient. The GP and then returns to the patient and informs them that they were right in the first place. Having been given some notes from the specialist the GP will be happy to perform the operation. Although there is of course the self-service option!

The approaches and management style within HR is at times contra to the rhetoric that it espouses. In a somewhat sweeping summary we see three styles adopted summarised in the ‘handshake.’ The HR leader who shakes hands and states their title rather than name may well be driven by their title and the management of their ‘empire’ – often independent of the organisation strategy. It is important to them that HR is seen as important rather than effective and efficient. The HR leader who shakes and simply gives their surname are similar yet even more ‘political’ – they need to be seen to be active and driving multi-projects rather than prioritising to maximise the impact they and their team can contribute.



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Both may well adopt a direct style (perceived sometimes as an 'edge' or being decisive when it is really simply rude and self-serving). Finally the HR leader who shakes hands and warmly offers their Christian name – the 'normality' at least gives a chance that a common sense, people oriented management style and a focused and shared set of priorities with collaborative approaches may help to realise the full contribution of people related policies and functions to the achievement of organisational vision.

From our research we recognise that when working well HR as a concept recognises how the sub-units combine with each other and the wider organisation personnel in any given issue to help enable the business environment, working conditions, team and individual performance and management to enable the intended organisational performance, engagement levels (customer and employee), reputation and capability.

HR is **for** the organisation and the people within it to maximise their impact for the organisation and its end customer. A simple check in terms of how activity is achieving this purpose can often throw up examples of where mis-alignment and lack of integration can negatively impact efficiency and effectiveness of service and contribution. Strong and focused measurement against the achievement of purpose is a strong step towards clarifying what type of people function(s) is required.

What more can be done?

Specialists must not be too precious. However, if they are truly business focussed, have a depth of knowledge that demands respect, measures that demonstrate genuine business impact and value, a managed communication framework, and a desire to succeed as part of the team, then the concept of a truly coordinated HR function can realise its value.

In sporting terms, such a team would see a business partner playing in central midfield-collecting, using, and distributing the ball, simplifying play with the trust to let go and let others perform their specialist roles. In sport, people are usually in either attack or defence and specialists. This is similar within business HR, where the two distinguishing roles would be

- organisation performance, engagement, reputation and capability development
- individual people support and employee relations

Tom Peters noted that the world has a surplus of similar companies, employing similar people, with similar educational backgrounds, working in similar jobs, coming up with similar ideas, producing similar things, with similar prices and similar quality' – People are and will be the difference. They often have potential capability we may never see!

To realise that potential we have to create a climate in which it may grow. Much of this is behavioural but it will be affected by the environment.

Part of the environment is organisation. There is logic in functions that support people being organised to enable a leveraged contribution of each and that they are fully equipped with specialists who can enable differentiation through people **for** the organisation.

As an example

- Specialist Services –
 - recruitment
 - learning and development (including responsibility for graduate development, executive development, management and leadership development, succession management and talent development, corporate universities or similar, learning resource centres)
 - communication and measurement frameworks
 - performance management and reward
 - well-being
- Shared services –
 - policy – (including diversity and equality, discipline and grievance, health & safety & absence management and implementation)
 - administration
 - people related data management collection and distribution – including links with organisation and performance data and specialist frameworks
 - technology infrastructure for people – linking with organisation IT
 - employee relations
 - legislation application

The exact split will be determined by the needs of the individual organisation, their level of people management maturity, the flexibility of interaction and the point at which business and support functions meet.

Individual functions that identify, recruit, develop, and support people need to be clear on their purpose, understand their expected impact and performance imperatives, and be comfortable wherever there is overlap.

What are we trying to do?

I would suggest a working definition I have found useful over the past few years – Through people, the organisation will seek differentiation with improved productivity and performance, enhanced engagement of employees (and subsequently customers), considered responsibility and better than the competition levels of capability - now and in the future.

We, in HR, are here to help them do so by creating a working environment and climate that encourages our people to contribute in the best possible way they can - every day.

E.g. Learning and development – create a learning culture & provide opportunities to learn the right things as easily as possible and relate those opportunities to performance, engagement, reputation and capability development.



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Policy – create working policies and practices that encourage greater engagement, ease of management, sense of belonging and purpose.

These are two examples of how at a high level definition we can clarify our purpose.

For the individual departments and for the wider functions we have also developed a checklist to ensure that their view of purpose is in line with that of the business as a whole.

The checklist considers:

- Alignment
- Integration
- Governance
- Efficiency
- Effectiveness
- Sustainability

As we review this checklist we consider processes, overlaps, handovers, quality of decision making, culture and co-ordination to establish the strength of the proposition and to identify what can be done to take contribution forward. This will include how to organise to maximise impact across teams and implementation approaches.

At the heart of my own view of the underlying mindset required to ensure HR succeed in the implementation of initiatives is a statement given to me by Frank Dick OBE, the former Head Coach of British Athletics – ‘The concept of personal responsibility can only be related when everyone is first accountable for their actions, behaviours and relationships to the mission or purpose and not the agenda of others (or themselves).’

It is my belief that if we are in HR then we should enjoy other peoples’ success and encourage such a desire to achieve with them. For this to happen we have to work with honesty, trust and a sense of fairness when credit is being celebrated.

HR is in danger of killing itself as it strives to justify itself. As it does so we see failed initiatives and disengagement all around.

The confusion, and resultant inefficiency, that has led many to refer to HR as ‘human remains’ will only be alleviated when those of us within HR are comfortable with simplicity. Simplicity is hard to achieve. It requires a depth of knowledge and comfort with the subject to accept the hidden logic.



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Thus we have to take responsibility for our own performance and to ensure that we recognise that such a performance may be enhanced with help from specialists. We have to enable specialists to be close to the business and to allow them to contribute. We need to identify where true specialists are able to lead strategy together rather than to compete and create the climate within HR that role models its own contribution so that others can see how it might work for them. This is the first step in turning people management and development initiatives into positive impactors.

For further information contact

Neville Pritchard
INL Consultancy Ltd

E-Mail: neville@inlconsultancy.com

Tel: +44 (0)7886 559 669 / +44 (0)845 833 1179