

A challenge to the HR function



In recent years HR professionals seem to have spent so much time deliberating over what it means to be an HR “Business Partner” that they could be in danger of missing the point – what their customers expect them to deliver!

For fear of being provocative let us argue that being valued by our line Manager colleagues is easy – get involved and help them produce results. This might sound simple, and of course “your industry is different from others” and “your managers are more difficult to work with”, but our feeling is that HR is suffering from one big insecurity complex – they worry so much about what managers think about them that they end up in a state of paralysis or learned helplessness.

Time for a reality check!

A simple premise

- People performance directly impacts upon business performance.
- The way people are managed directly impacts upon their performance.
- The way HR interact with managers directly impacts upon how they manage their people.

If you accept this simple logic then there can only be one conclusion – the role of HR is to find a way to work with line Managers in order to help them more effectively manage their people. Voila – Business Partner!

OK, how?

1. Define a people strategy for the business. Which means....
 - a. Talk to the senior people in the organisation and get them to explain their vision for the business, what they think needs to be done to achieve that vision and how they measure progress towards that vision. They will not use the word “competencies” at all throughout your conversation. They will however be able to describe to you who their best people are and why they value them.
 - b. Talk to line managers about the same things, but also get them to explain some of the things that drive them mad when carrying out their daily jobs. Start to tease out the people frustrations they have. This will probably be along the lines of managing absence rather than the need for a new Talent Management process!
 - c. Talk to employees. What do they find positive and negative about working for the organisation, their boss, you?
 - d. Add in some best practice HR from your own knowledge, stir for a few days and be ready for the picture to become clear one morning in the shower!

Here's one we prepared earlier :

- Define a competency model which describes the kinds of things people need to be able to do in order to be successful in your organisation. Use the information from point a) and b) above to do this. Don't seek their input on the specific wording or you will be there for months.....
- Develop bite sized training programmes that deliver the knowledge and skill elements of the competency model.
- Train managers in the leadership practices and competencies you have identified to enable them to get the best out of their people and to achieve the organisation's strategy and objectives.
- Develop additional training for line managers to address the people frustrations they described to you in b) above. Again make it bite-sized so they attend.
- Run an employee survey to identify the issues that are important to them. But, don't forget to share the results with them and make sure you work with your managers to address the issues highlighted.
- Re-design the appraisal system so that it ensures everyone has clear objectives that tie in to points a) and b) above and that it measures competencies – ideally using 360 degree feedback.

- Implement assessment centres to ensure you recruit people who display the critical competencies required for their job. Use line managers as assessors.
- Implement development centres to assess the capability of your highest flyers in the context of more senior jobs. Provide coaching and additional experience for those that are identified with real potential.
- Provide coaching for your most senior leaders so their behaviour begins to change for the positive and filter down the organisation.
- Review the reward system to check it is rewarding the behaviours you identified earlier and the achievement of objectives.
- Review all the old HR processes you have to check they are not causing the frustration you found out about in point b) above. If they are, re-design them, ideally using electronic tools.
- DO NOT make any statements along the lines of “we want to be valued as a strategic business partner...”!

2. Take a few risks

Next time you are in a meeting with your line manager colleagues resist the temptation to say “no...because!”. HR should be about helping managers make decisions. Your input is to provide them with expert advice with regard to decisions involving people, whether it be recruitment, discipline, organisation changes, or getting rid of them. As with all business decisions, people decisions carry a level of risk. If you view your role as preventing ALL possible risks you will become a blocker to what your managers want to achieve. They will resent you and probably do the wrong thing anyway, which will at least make you feel better by reinforcing your view that managers are difficult to work with, don't respect HR etc etc. You will also continue to fight the fires that you helped to create in the first place.

Instead, listen, ask them to explain what they would like to achieve, why they would like to achieve it and how it will help them remove the frustrations they have and achieve their goals and the business goals. None of your line managers would buy a piece of capital equipment worth £50k without first outlining a rational business case so why should they risk a tribunal claim of £50k without doing the same!

After listening and reflecting back on them so they know you understand, outline to them the financial risks associated with their proposal. This might be a tribunal claim, but it could just as well be a drop in employee motivation which in turn could lead to a drop in productivity, an increase in turnover, an increase in absence etc. – all of which cost money. Even though they might be “hidden” costs you can bet your last Euro that given the choice your managers would rather avoid the “cost” of having to recruit a replacement employee, conduct umpteen return to work interviews, discipline people for poor performance or fire people!

Then, **critically**, do not say “no!”. Provide a calculated proposal, based on what they want to achieve and what you know is possible, recommending what you advise they do. This of course should be consistent with current legislation designed to limit the company's exposure to financial risk and it should managers taking responsibility for *their* actions, but it should also allow them to achieve what they want to achieve. All of a sudden you have provided them with a solution that they can implement and not prevented them from doing something – which they would blame on you.

3. Constantly communicate

Forget change management programmes – each time something happens that impacts on people, organise a presentation and tell them what it is all about, why and how it will affect them. Then ask if they have any questions. Usually there won't be any questions so, after half an hour, go for a walk and ask people if they have any questions – you will spend the next couple of hours answering questions. This will also increase your visibility and I guarantee you will continue to learn more new stuff about the company than you ever would have before. You can then use this newfound knowledge to converse with your managers about some of the issues they are facing everyday.

4. Discover your allies and keep your enemies at bay

There will always be old fashioned line managers who do not value the contribution of HR. Fine, but you can guarantee they will be the ones who have the most de-motivated employees. Rather than spend all your time

trying to convince them, instead find out who the managers are that appreciate your help and contribution and work with them instead. You will find the working day becomes more enjoyable, you will form closer relationships with these managers, they will seek you out before they need help instead of when they have made a mistake and you will go home feeling a level of job satisfaction you never felt before. You will still worry about the negative managers of course, but only in the same way that your company's salespeople worry about the negative buyers they have on their patch who will not convert to your company's products no matter what!

5. Help your Managers take some tough decisions

Many Managers view HR as warm and fuzzy, yet they often avoid the most difficult of decisions where people are concerned – when to get rid of them. Of course, very few people come to work intending to do a bad job, but we all recognise that there comes a time when the business would be best served by removing those negative individuals who seem to have a disproportionate impact on their colleagues, your time and your managers' time.

Engage your managers in discussing who these people are and, using the approach outlined in step 2) above facilitate your Managers to commit to a plan of action for dealing with these employees.

When the time arises hold firm and take the opportunity to “facilitate the departure” of these problem employees. Your Managers will respect you for it and you will often find that other employees make the comment to you “it's about time too....!!”

6. Write an article about it

If this all works then tell others in your profession how you did it. HR can then stop talking about what it thinks it should be doing and instead concentrate on talking about what it actually did that worked.

7. or leave

There comes a time when you might need to realise that your talents would be better served by working in an organisation that does appreciate the value of HR. Don't be afraid to take control of your own career instead of worrying about everyone else's.