

The Role of Human Resources, Redefined

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By Shu Yeung

What exactly is Human Resources' role and what impact does it have on the organization? Perspectives often vary depending on whom you ask, the level of interaction with HR, and with whom in HR one has interacted. It becomes even more inconsistent, as the range of support that HR provides varies greatly depending on the stage at which the organization is. Is this a perception-based issue or simply the lack of identity or consistency within the HR function? The prevailing terminology among HR professionals to describe the role is "HR business partner" or "being at the table" with line managers. But what does that actually mean and translate to in a concrete organizational setting? Even for myself as an HR "business partner", I find that I, as well as my colleagues, struggle with the role we play. If it isn't clear for us, then how can we expect our managers to understand how we can add value?

There are many aspects to the Human Resources role. At a fundamental level, it represents the views and policies of the organization or the broader cultural identity of the organization and the values it empowers. In this role, HR is involved in ensuring that the interests of the employer are maintained and is the official face/spokesperson for the company. When we deal with employment relations issues, we are mindful of minimizing exposure to the company and when we implement programs, it is with the goal in mind to align these with business objectives which translates to performance and productivity. If the HR organization leans heavily towards this model, the risk is having company thought and programs highly influenced by management or by the highest level of management. Not surprisingly, HR takes on somewhat of a policing role. In these situations, I have heard HR being referenced as "implementers/executors" for upper management's agenda – they do what they are told to do and the result is that employees fear talking to HR. In such situations, it is difficult for HR to determine the underlying organizational issues and help the organization meet its objectives through its people.

Another aspect of the role is that it is the department to which employees come to if there are grievances or concerns from employees who are seeking an arbitrator or objective body; employees are provided an outlet to voice their issues. Representing individual employees' interests plays out particularly during employment relations issues, talent

development or when HR takes on the role of corporate ethics. As an example, if there are problems between a manager and employee, we listen to the employee's concerns and, if there is an overwhelming consensus regarding a difficult manager, we may take action to address the management issues. We are also a sounding board to employees about their development needs and plans, and assist them in their development. In addition, we maintain and uphold certain ethical standards and practices to which all employees should adhere.

Although HR can be seen as representing the interests of the employees, it is within the constraints of the employer that it serves. Given the "fine line" between interests of employee and interests of employer, it is difficult for HR professionals to be taken completely seriously by both parties. We are constantly balancing the different roles that we hold. Moreover, this is further complicated by the diverse professional backgrounds and lack of consistent prior training of individuals who tend to pursue HR roles. From my own and other colleagues' experiences, I believe that the future HR role will be slightly different from what has been presented thus far. We will need to play a more prominent role as a partner in empowering and promoting the organization's value system and cultural identity. This redefined role will help us to gain the respect of employees and management and to bring us closer to true "business partners". Some will claim that they are already functioning in this role and perhaps that is the case; however, more often than not, it is discussed more in theory than actually done in practice.

Every individual in an organization, regardless of his/her level and role, is in some way acting as agents/representatives of the organization. What is an organization without the people who comprise it? We represent the employer in every aspect of our work and we need to be constantly reminded that decisions that we make are ones that reflect the policies of the company and its organizational culture. The range of influence is from strategic to operational HR issues: from handling day to day employment relations issues to initiatives that help to align the people with its objectives or to encourage/emphasize a certain culture.

In summary, any evolution of the HR function needs to address the following elements and this requires a delicate balancing act: moral backbone and representative of the employer and independent consultant. What do I mean by "moral backbone and representative of the employer"? With every action that we take, we must take into account that we are representing the employer. However, we need to have a strong sense of morals to call out issues that would be detrimental to an organization or to its employees. If we notice that a certain manager is preventing the team from feeling empowered and meeting its objectives or isolating them from other parts of the organization, we should be able to address this directly. Sometimes the HR group is a microcosm of the politics and egos of the broader organization, often to the detriment of productivity and innovation. However, we need to put that aside and be true to our redefined role.

As part of the redefined role of HR, there is an aspect of being an independent consultant. Although an employee of the organization, we are the only function that has the ability, given the breadth of the role, to step back and act as an outside observer. We play a combined role of process consultant, facilitator and mediator. As Schein defines, the process consultant “seeks to give the client insight into what is going on around him, within him, and between him and other people...(and) helps the client to figure out what he should do about the situation”. This combined role allows us to assist line managers by asking questions, observing, being objective and providing insight that will be helpful to his/her role/function and to the organization.

In this redefined role, we can effectively partner with management to ensure that the success of the organization is met through its people; also, employees will be more vocal and open to HR. Sounds easy, but it isn't. The role being asked for requires immense courage among HR professionals. It requires a paradigm shift from following the traditional organizational structure lines to partnering with management; the hierarchical structure of only following managers' directives is challenged. Then what would be the benefit of following this new paradigm, if it causes such an uprooting change? We absolutely do not have a choice if the HR function is to maintain its existence as a strategic partner. This is the role definition we have been waiting for that will make us respected in everyone's eyes. The last time you were asked the question, “What is Human Resources' role?” - think about how you reacted.