



Naked truth about HR revealed

Do we really hate HR? By Dr M Amr Sadik

In recent years a lot of debate and controversial discussions have veered towards the need for HR to gain a seat at the board level and to be involved in the strategic planning process or in drawing up the future of the organisation. Furthermore, HR practitioners collectively lament the feeling that they are not taken seriously, not invited to engage in their organisation's strategic discussions, and not paid adequately.

With the current business climate, it is not sufficient for HR practitioners to focus on just one area; they have to perform various activities effectively and efficiently to contribute to the long-term success of their organisations.

Additionally, CEOs and board members are looking for strategic contributions and new value added to their organisations. They expect HR to come up with innovative ideas to make the organisation more productive and effective. They also need to know who will be the future leaders and how they will be developed and retained. Meanwhile, business unit managers are expecting HR to staff their areas competently and assist them in achieving their departmental objectives. On the other hand, there are some HR practitioners that are not up to the challenge and very satisfied with trivial work, administrative tasks, policing activities and paperwork.

The real problem isn't that HR practitioners aren't business oriented or financially savvy enough, or too focused on delivering programmes rather than enhancing value, but that many organisations

aren't as demanding, as rigorous, as creative about the human element in business as they are about finance, marketing, and R and D, except in the most forward-thinking organisations.

An article published by *Fast Company* in August 2005 titled "Why We Hate HR" provoked and demoralised many practitioners and probably motivated others to change the way they conducted their businesses.

It spelled out the following points:

- HR people aren't the sharpest tacks in the box;
- HR pursues efficiency in lieu of value;
- HR isn't working for you; and
- HR doesn't get the corner office.

In my journey with various organisations of all sizes and nationalities in the last two and half decades, I have seen many paradoxes in defining and interpreting what senior executives need and want from the Human Resources function.

Snapshots

In the early 90s, I was invited for an interview by a Vice President of a large group of companies dealing with steel manufacturing for the position of Group Director of Human Resources. After the interview, the VP asked if I had any questions. I replied, "Why do you need such a post and what is the person going to do?"

The VP was not expecting such a question. After serious thought, the VP said, "We need someone to present the group monthly HR report, handle P and P, standardise health care plans and other possible programmes when required." The VP couldn't spell out what the exact role of HR would be.

Several years ago, I was invited to a board meeting along with all of my colleagues celebrating a new venture. They were discussing the time plan, schedules, mobilisation and other serious stuff. I raised my hand to speak and the Chairman gave me the floor. I smiled and asked, "if we are moving to the new operation in a new country, who will be running the current operation, especially since we don't have enough experienced members yet to replace the top executives or even the seniors?" I continued, "Sorry, but we were not involved from the beginning and were kept in the dark as this was a confidential project according to the Chief Commercial Officer". There were huge obstacles ahead of us and many challenges needed to be addressed, and HR was being blamed for not taking its role seriously.

In early 2009 I was called for an interview, at a large diversified group of companies in the Middle East and Gulf States, with the Senior Executive VP who was very relaxed and promising. He started with a quick orientation and history of the group, explaining and how they had grown from one company to the other, and from a family business to a corporate business. I patiently waited to hear something about the HR function, but nothing was said. After a lengthy orientation, he asked what we could do regarding the HR function.

I started with what they wanted to achieve, their vision and where would they like to go with the HR function. He was writing every single word I said. Unfortunately, we were not able to conclude the meeting favorably because they simply pay far less than the market.

A couple of years ago, in 2009, as the Group CHRO, I was sitting with the CEO of a major organisation in Middle East, Africa and Asia with more than 8,000 staff members, discussing the HR plan for the group. It is important to note that before I joined the group, major facts were crystal clear; (1) I was candidate number ten in this position. No-one had lasted long. (2) The CEO and board members undermined the HR and IT functions. (3) The CEO didn't like to read or go through several pages. and

(4) No success story will be made. Therefore, the plan was submitted on one A3 page and discussed verbally. Unfortunately, the result was discouraging, and the CEO said, "Do whatever you want". A few months later, he stated clearly during a group HR meeting that HR means primarily cost cutting, and reducing expenses, no more no less.

In late 2010 I was consulting to the CEO of a medium sized computer hardware organisation, assisting him in identifying potential HR Managers for his organisation and creating the right HR function. The CEO was looking for the most economical candidate with considerable experience. Asking the CEO what the budget for the position was, was a mistake. The figure provided didn't match the skills and experience required. When we couldn't find the right candidate, the CEO decided to elevate the administrative assistant who had zero experience in HR to the position of HR Manager.

Lip service in HR doesn't work or last for long. When I have joined organisations which paid lip service or undermined the HR function, I normally quit. There is no time to waste in the current competitive environment with such organisations.

No wonder HR practitioners are frustrated. They know how important they could be intellectually and professionally. They can see clearly many of the issues that torment their organisations and would like the authority and power to direct change. But they almost never get it. Instead, they're forced to witness countless executions, bad decisions and wrong moves, but they have to ensure that terminations are conducted appropriately and desks cleared without a fuss. It's enough to make anyone hard and defeatist.

To this end, what did these snapshots demonstrate? And what important facts can we conclude? And what action can we draw? ■

Reference

1. http://blogs.hbr.org/taylor/2010/06/why_we_shouldnt_hate_hr.html

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