

FROM HATING HR TO LOVING HR

by Angelo Pesce, CHRP, CMC

Introduction

Much criticism has been made about the role, performance, and value of human resources (HR) to organizations over time. In an article entitled “Why I hate HR” published in the August 2005 issue of Fast magazine, Keith H. Hammonds took several shots at HR, some of which are deserved and some of which are not. As an HR professional for nearly 40 years, I believe a response is required. What follows addresses how HR can change its course and increase its value as an asset to any organization.

In his article, Mr. Hammonds states that HR is at best a necessary evil, but is most likely a bureaucratic force that enforces rules, dampens creativity, and impedes change. He further states that HR concentrates on activities, rather than on the contribution they make to the outcome of the organization and that HR people are risk-averse, when the very nature of the function should be to fashion exceptions that keep pace with today’s fast-paced, changing business world.

On the whole, I agree with Mr. Hammonds’ criticisms. My primary objection is that he holds HR wholly responsible, despite his acknowledgement that some CEOs are so myopic that even when HR tries to introduce innovations, they are often not allowed. Therefore, the first step is to make senior management aware of the value to the organization that HR can and should make.

As Mr. Hammonds states, “HR should find the best hires, nurture the stars, foster a productive environment, and be joined to business strategy at the hip — because in a knowledge economy, companies with the best talent win.”

To achieve the expectations raised by Mr. Hammonds, we must first look at how HR is generally being practiced. We must look at what competencies HR professionals need to have and what HR systems should look in order to achieve the desired state that he describes. In other words, we need to shift our paradigms of what HR is and what HR does.

Paradigm Shift 1: A Personal HR Mission

First, every HR professional needs to develop a personal mission statement. For example, my personal mission is that, as an HR professional, my primary function is to hire competent and committed people, keep them current, and treat them so well that they will stay continuously committed to the vision, values, and goals of the organization. To do these things, an HR professional must:

- Be a visionary dreamer as well as a strategic thinker
- Have a balance of soft and hard skills
- Be creative and fearless in problem-solving
- Understand, accept, and acquire business acumen.

Paradigm Shift 2: From Consultant to Partner

HR professionals must approach their relationship with line managers differently from today's model. I describe this as a shift from the 'consultant model' to the 'partnership model'. This can be simply defined as going from a subordinate role (consultant) to full partnership with line managers.

The Consultant Model: Limiting Competencies

First of all, we must accept the truth of Mr. Hammonds' lament and accept the fact that the current consultant model is lacking because it limits itself to the following competencies:

- Knowledge of employment law and other accepted HR processes, such as performance evaluation and compensation
- Analytical skills so we can define the issues to be resolved
- Negotiating skills so we can develop agreements between various parties involved with employees in the organization
- Communication skills so we can make sure the parties understand.

Although these competencies are still needed, the way we apply them gives rise to Hammonds' lament. Here are some examples of incomplete or improper application and some suggestions for improvements:

1. **Knowledge** is used to create authority for the HR professional and often does not help line managers deal with operational issues. When we say no, we exert power. Line managers often involve HR very late in the decision-making process, which often puts HR professionals in the position of having to say no because the suggested solution violates a law or a collective agreement. However, even under these circumstances, HR can and should lead to a more appropriate solution by using and sharing their knowledge to create acceptable alternatives to solve a particular problem.
2. HR professionals often diminishes the value of their own **analytical skills** by being too timid in creating potential solutions. HR has become risk-averse by seeking the 'one right solution' and by having a 'setting a precedent' mindset. Collective agreements and policies must be applied with as much flexibility as the language will allow. Solutions should be consistent with the organization's values without being uniform.
3. **Communication** gets convoluted because, instead of writing policies in a way that ensures understanding, the primary goal is often to write them so that they comply with the provisions of the collective agreement. This renders even the communication risk-averse. In today's world, this cannot be the case. Organizations need their employees to be committed to the enterprise and its goals. To achieve this, communication should be clear, concise, and helpful to employees.

The Partnership Model: A New Approach

So it isn't enough for HR professionals to develop more relevant competencies and convince managers to nurture their human resources. They must also create a new approach — a partnership — in their relationships with line managers. The following points illustrate what needs to happen in order to achieve the partnership model:

1. HR must develop a new definition of who its customer is. All too often, HR professionals make the line manager or the employee the client. I believe that there is only one definition that has merit: HR has **the same client** as the line manager and that is the organization's customer. Each partner contributes his or her expertise and effort in order to meet the needs of the customer.

2. The attitude that is prevalent today and leads to discord between line managers and HR professionals is characterized by one or the other being in a subservient role, depending on what is needed. When line managers withhold authority and stifle some HR initiative, HR becomes subordinate. When HR applies its specialized know-how to stop a solution from being implemented, this makes the line manager subordinate — leading to the cry, “I hate HR!” In the partnership model, **both sides own the problem**. Each partner brings its special knowledge and authority to solving the problem. When line managers and HR professionals work together, offering their know-how freely and performing the required tasks competently, the outcome will be better than one obtained when they work separately.
3. HR must be held **accountable for the outcome** in the same way that line managers are held accountable. In the consultant model, HR is accountable for the quality of the advice and not for the outcome. In fact, as Mr. Hammonds states, HR is often measured on activities without knowing how these activities contribute to the organization’s success. In the partnership model, HR contributions go beyond advice and include tasks, programs, and projects that lead to measurable business outcomes.

Similarly, line managers must change the way they approach their HR decisions. Typically, HR professionals are not involved from the beginning of the problem-solving continuum. Rather, they are asked for input when a decision has essentially been made; it is then presented to HR for implementation.

This approach often places HR in a reactive and negative mode. Decisions made without HR input do not take into account or have misinterpreted or misapplied the law or the collective agreement — or even company policies. At this point, HR must sound like a naysayer.

Surely Mr. Hammonds isn’t suggesting that HR routinely allows contraventions just so they can appear flexible or creative? In the partnership model, HR and line managers own the issues involving staff jointly, and HR is involved from the very beginning of the decision-making continuum.

Paradigm Shift 3: From Exploiting to Nurturing

Mr. Hammonds hopes for an HR department that is independent of the finance department, especially when tough decisions need to be made. He states that HR should not be the lackey of the financial executives, but should champion employees’ value at least as vigorously as I.T. fights for its computers!

Again, I find myself in agreement with Mr. Hammonds. Line managers, up to and including CEOs, often view their human resources — the people who work for them — as resources to be exploited. On the contrary, in today’s business environment, successful companies nurture their human resources.

However, I disagree with Mr. Hammonds when he holds HR fully responsible for its failure to contribute to the success of the organization because (he claims) HR professionals don’t think like business people.

Business thinking needs to change dramatically because, as noted, employees are so frequently seen as a resource to be exploited. This probably comes from centuries of business people exploiting all kinds of natural resources without much thought to the long-term value of these resources. As a result, we have destroyed forests, poisoned rivers, lakes, and oceans, and polluted the air we breathe. Most attempts to moderate this exploitation have been met with strong resistance from business people.

It is this attitude that selects exploitation over nurturing of human resources. It is this attitude, rather than so-called HR incompetence, that leads companies to destroy trust and

commitment of staff for short-term financial solutions. With this attitude in place among an organization's leaders, HR cannot contribute in the way Mr. Hammonds wants it to so that he can love HR.

Instead, it is line managers who must shift from a philosophy of exploitation to one of nurturing, especially in today's knowledge economy where it is the employees who own the capital — the know-how — that the enterprise needs to succeed.

We must create working environments that value people for who they are as individuals, as well as for their role as important resources for the organization. For example, valuing employees as individuals calls for a commitment by managers to ensuring that their employees have a balanced home/work life — a commitment that must be sustained even in tough times.

For their part, HR professionals must be creative and fearless when dealing with employees and must stop being risk-averse by always worrying about setting precedents. They must embrace the challenge that, in order to retain employees and keep them committed, creative solutions must be found — solutions that foster business goals while at the same time valuing and respecting employees.

An Illustration: Lay-offs

As an illustration of exploitation versus nurturing, let's consider the case of lay-offs. In a financial crunch, there is very little hesitation on the part of senior leaders when it comes to jettisoning valuable employees. If HR professionals were truly business-oriented, they would not rush to support the line manager's simplistic decision to lay-off staff — the organization's human capital — in order to resolve short-term financial issues. How often have massive lay-offs been followed quickly by rehiring? These are not sound business decisions. The question is: where was HR when these decisions were being made? Did HR offer alternatives to lay-offs? Did HR demonstrate the long-term costs as well as immediate costs of such a move?

Successful companies just don't make these errors when their HR departments are leaders. Mr. Hammonds cites examples of companies that love HR. They do so because HR has successfully shown a balanced business case by demonstrating the cost of exploiting employees versus the long-term benefits of nurturing them.

Conclusion

To accomplish this, all HR systems must be adjusted to facilitate the following:

- More complete and thorough sharing of information
- More timely input into decisions and into the development of HR programs
- Clearer identification of the business objectives to be achieved and how each partner will contribute to achieving them
- Ensuring that performance management systems truly evaluate and hold accountable both the HR professional and the line manager for the quality and quantity of their contribution to the success of the enterprise.

In conclusion, I am confident that, with a shift from the consultative model to the partnership model and with a shift in business thinking from exploiting resources to nurturing resources, the relevance of HR will become obvious and valued. And perhaps the next article Mr. Hammonds writes will be called Why I Love HR.

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