

HUMAN RESOURCES PARTNERSHIP MODEL

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Introduction

For the most part, a well-understood role for a human resources department is one in which the HR department sees the managers and employees as its clients and does everything it can to satisfy their needs. In this scenario, HR professionals behave as consultants. Except for standardized processes — enrolment in benefits, employee files, payroll processes, and so on — HR is essentially waiting passively for a ‘customer’ to call. This approach holds HR accountable for the quality of its advice and does not see it as a major contributor to a specific outcome.

Flaws in the Consultant Model

However, this model has four significant flaws.

1. The wrong customer

HR’s service focus is incorrectly placed on managers and employees as their ‘customers’. In this model, HR actually contributes to the lack of a co-ordinated policy towards employees. The root assumption is that, by serving line management as individuals, HR serves management’s goals. This is false: an individual manager’s style and goals are not always aligned with the bigger picture or the organization’s strategic plan.

2. No accountability for outcome

HR professionals are not held accountable for the outcome, whether good or bad. They are allowed to hide behind their expertise because that is all that is asked and expected of them. They are not expected to contribute to the implementation of the solution. I call it ‘hiding’ because, if the outcome is flawed, then HR blames line managers: “Our advice was correct, but they didn’t do it right.” Line managers in turn blame HR, saying that the advice was impractical or didn’t work. The result is a lack of respect for each other’s skills and abilities, and improper use of those skills and abilities.

3. HR expertise is devalued

Management does not make the best use of HR expertise because it is often sought only when someone or something is in trouble. HR is then asked, at best, to comment on an already established solution or, at worst, simply to bless the solution. Because the organization’s HR professionals have not been part of the process during which the problem was identified and the solution developed, they often have to say no, thus creating a reputation for being nay-sayers and blockers of good ideas. Thus the outcome is often compromised because of the fire-fighting that often accompanies a change.

4. Misaligned with business goals

Perhaps the most significant flaw is that HR activities are not aligned with the business goals of the enterprise and, if such alignment does occur, it is more instinctive than planned.

This happens because, when the customer is (for example) the line manager, then his or her view of the organizational good has to prevail. By definition, however, this viewpoint is too narrow and cannot take into account the goals other departments and divisions.

In the consultant model, line leaders frequently make the following complaints make about HR projects:

- The project isn't useful
- HR's input comes too late to get proper consideration
- The project doesn't consider operational issues, such as workload and timing.

As a result, line leaders usually regard HR's projects as 'flavour of the month'.

Conversely, when a line leader has an issue that involves the work force — from the application of a collective agreement to performance and disciplinary issues — they often involve HR at the end of the decision-making process, prompting the following complaints from HR professionals:

- Line leaders know nothing about collective agreements and employment law
- Line leaders do not understand, or do not want to understand, that there are processes and policies that must be followed.

Given that line managers often don't involve HR until near the end of the decision-making continuum, the only role open to HR is that of commenting on the validity of the solution and that comment will, more often than not, be negative. This happens because potential decisions are being evaluated without the expert understanding of collective agreements, employment law, and organizational policies that HR brings to the table. The result is usually that HR takes on the role of enforcement to ensure that the organization doesn't run counter to the requirements of these agreements, laws, and policies. Consequently, they are often seen as nay-sayers.

The Partnership Model

In the partnership model, each partner must involve the other from the beginning of the decision-making process, when the problem or issue is being identified. In this way, both partners can be assured that all relevant expertise is involved and being used to identify the issues, create alternatives, evaluate those alternatives, and make a decision. Working together in this way makes the most of the HR department's value to the organization.

To begin to create the partnership model, however, HR must align its strategic objectives with the business goals of the organization. The HR professional must make every effort to understand the organization's business. The particular problems associated with that business must be understood if the best possible and most balanced solutions are to be developed and implemented. While being at every meeting where the business is discussed would be ideal, it is obviously inefficient and impractical.

However, to stay on top of things, obtaining minutes of meetings of the line partners and having regularly scheduled update meetings with them to discuss business issues is very desirable and must be made feasible. (In the case of unions, in addition to the formal union/management meetings, informal meetings to learn about the issues of the national union as well as those of the local union are a must.)

This re-alignment results in a significant change in how HR professionals are perceived and, most significantly, in the way they view their own work: they now see how their efforts contribute to the success of the organization.

To accomplish this re-alignment, two major paradigm shifts must occur:

1. New definition of the 'customer'

The most significant paradigm shift is in establishing who HR serves: who is the customer? The answer is that **the customer is the organization** and its strategic goals and objectives.

How does HR contribute to these goals? HR is responsible for using its expertise, in partnership with line leaders, to create a work force that is engaged and committed to achieving the organization's goals and to keep that work force committed to those goals. HR cannot do this on its own — nor can line leaders. HR and line leaders must come together as partners. Thus HR has to become far more pro-active and involved in the everyday life of the organization. In short, HR must know and understand the business from an operational as well as from a human perspective.

Line leaders must also become much more attuned to the imperatives of its work force. In this model, the expertise of both perspectives comes together. The result is a much better outcome than if the expertise is applied separately (which is the approach in the consultant model). In this blended approach, both partners share accountability for the outcome.

2. Enhanced decision-making process

Typically, the decision-making process has three major phases:

- Identifying the problem or issue
- Developing alternative solutions
- Evaluating alternatives and selecting a solution

In the consultant model, line leaders and HR professionals don't involve each other at any step in the decision-making process. In the partnership model, the partners must involve each other from the beginning of the decision-making process in order to ensure that the melding of expertise takes place in order to create a better outcome.

What Does Each Partner Bring to the Table?

In any partnership, each partner brings to the relationship a combination of skills, abilities, and experience so that, when mixed together and carried out competently, the result is much better than if the partners had acted on their own. The partnership model is based on the following premises:

1. When each partner competently performs the tasks to which they apply their expertise, the result will be more successful than one obtainable from each individually.

A. What do line leaders (managers and supervisors) bring to the partnership?

- a. Expert knowledge of the operation
- b. Intimate knowledge of the individuals within their areas of responsibility
- c. Authority to make decisions.

a. Expert knowledge of the operation

Line leaders know their operations and how they connect to the organization's strategic goals and objectives. When evaluating alternatives, the impact on operations *and* on staff must both be considered. Achieving this balance is crucial to the organization's success. Line leaders must ensure that their HR partners understand the operational imperatives so that the balance between people and operational needs is achieved.

- b. Intimate knowledge of the individuals within their areas of responsibility**
While HR has expert knowledge of people from a global or group perspective, line leaders know their people as individuals. They bring this knowledge to the decision-making table in order to modify global HR solutions in way that makes a better fit between the individuals and operational requirements.
- c. Authority to make decisions**
Without the line leaders' authority to make things happen in their areas of responsibility, nothing will get done. The HR partner must never underestimate the significance of this factor.

B. What does HR bring to the partnership?

- a. Specialized knowledge and expertise
 - b. Relationships
 - c. Innovative approaches to dealing with people issues.
- a. Specialized knowledge and expertise**
Today there is a multitude of employment laws and best practices that a line leader, who has his or her own field of expert knowledge to be concerned with, cannot hope to acquire at the same level as an HR professional. Here, as an illustration, is a short list:
- Employment laws (e.g., Employment Standards Act, Pay Equity Act, Pension Benefits Act, Human Rights Code, Charter of Rights)
 - Highly specialized areas, (e.g., compensation policies, education, training and development, adult learning, performance management, communication)
 - Labour legislation (e.g., Ontario Labour Relations Act, Hospital Labour Disputes Arbitration Act)
 - Jurisprudence set by various tribunals and Arbitration Boards (associated with labour legislation)
 - Some elements of common law and criminal law that deal with contracts and employee behaviour as they apply to the work environment
 - Interpretation and application of collective agreements and other terms and conditions of employment carried out in the context of jurisprudence, as established in common law and arbitral decisions, as well as concern over relationships and the impact on employee engagement
 - Occupational Health and Safety Act, which places a large burden on managers to strive for the health and safety of their employees. In addition, the financial consequences of non-compliance are huge. On the positive side, programs designed to alleviate stress, enhance health and safety, or facilitate the return to work of injured personnel in a timely manner all require specialized know-how, not only to provide significant financial savings, but also to contribute positively to the engagement of staff in achieving the organization's goal and objectives.

Needless to say, maintaining a high level of expertise in these areas makes HR professionals a very valuable asset to any organization. Consequently, resources must be invested in a program of constant learning and upgrading for HR staff so that they can acquire this expertise and stay up to date.

b. Relationships

One of the most valuable assets that HR professionals bring to the partnership is the relationships that they have developed with staff, unions, and line leaders. These relationships are extremely valuable for the resolution of issues, especially when those relationships are founded on the value system of the organization. The HR professional interprets each stakeholder to the other, so that each one's understanding of the other's needs is enhanced, along with trust and the commitment to the organization's mission.

To truly be effective in this area, the HR professional must understand the culture and value system of the organization, as well as knowing when to uphold them and when to seek change in the culture.

Maintaining positive relationships throughout the organization is a big plus in resolving even the thorniest of problems without endangering the engagement of staff. The best way to maintain positive relationships is for HR professionals to look at every interaction with staff, unions, and line leaders as an opportunity to enhance the relationship. They must be up to date on issues of importance to the stakeholders. Understanding the sources of frustration — what makes stakeholders happy and responsive and what does not — is crucial. These insights must be included in the decision-making process. This can only be achieved through a continuous dialogue founded on integrity and trust among the stakeholders.

In the case of relationships with staff, every opportunity must be taken to demonstrate commitment to them both as people and as employees. HR must always strive both to understand the needs of the organization *and* to facilitate solutions for employees whenever possible.

c. Innovative approaches to dealing with people issues

Societal norms, business issues, and staff needs are constantly in a state of flux. What worked yesterday will not work today. The HR professional must seek continuously to find new ways to carry out HR policies, processes, and programs in order to improve the organization's culture and environment so that engagement can thrive. In short, HR must constantly be re-aligning its programs so as not to become counter-productive.

Approaches to change, disputes, motivation, training, and evaluation must be constantly updated. The HR professional must seek out best practices from around the world and adjust them to fit the particular organization's culture. The HR professional must share this knowledge unselfishly with their line partners in order to gain understanding and acceptance.

With staff, they must constantly draw attention to the necessary balance between the individual's needs and the organization's needs. They must help staff to understand what it takes to succeed both personally and as an organization. They must be constantly on the lookout for ways to improve the work environment so that contributions are recognized and appropriately rewarded. These actions are not at the expense of either party; they often complement each other. This level of expertise

requires constant reading about the latest management philosophies and attending selected conferences.

The Services Contract

Like any model, the partnership model must create methods to implement the philosophy contained in the model. Otherwise, it will only 'sound good' and substantial change will not happen, leading to the frustration that occurs when expectations are not met.

Each organization must develop its own methods of putting the partnership concept into practice. One approach that the author has implemented successfully is the service contract. This tool enables achievement of three major objectives:

1. Identifying all the necessary tasks to be carried out in order for an HR process to succeed. A valuable side effect of this exercise is that listing the tasks creates efficiencies because it avoids re-inventing the wheel every time a staffing action is needed.
2. Assigning responsibility and establishing deadlines for completing tasks. As a result, HR processes are carried out much more efficiently and produce better and more timely results. Note that, in terms of assigned responsibility, service contracts will vary on a case-by-case basis, based on the expertise and knowledge of the individual partners. Each is a unique exercise, not only to complete a process successfully, but also to teach and learn new skills. In short, while the tasks remain constant, who performs them will vary.
3. From an HR perspective, managing other partners' expectations about what HR will *not* do. There should be no misunderstanding about who is expected to do what and by when.

Conclusion

The partnership model turns the HR function into what David Wiess calls "high-impact HR." It is 'high impact' because, once the model is implemented, HR professionals have — and can demonstrate — a level of expertise that is respected by all stakeholders. As a result, their contribution will be sought at a more appropriate time in the decision-making process, thus increasing the likelihood of successful outcomes. This in turn will go a long way towards ensuring that all staff are proud of and committed to the organization and what it stands for.

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