The Quest for High Performing HR People: it's not just about skills

Changing demands

HR is partly about creating high performing organisations, and one question that keeps being asked is how we can create more high performing senior HR people. Whether we accept the new HR roles devised (and revised) by Dave Ulrich or not, it is clear that the demands on HR people (and everyone else for that matter) are increasing. The increasing use of technology and the trend for outsourcing mean that the core HR processes have been streamlined and the costs managed. The consequence of this is that the remaining roles need to demonstrate real added value to the business; be this through working at the strategic level or providing high quality HR knowledge and expertise to impact business performance.

Shortage of high performing HR people

There are clearly many outstanding HR people who are making a significant impact on the success of their organisations, and yet it is not an unusual refrain to hear from employers that they cannot find enough good ones to fill the key roles. One HR Director of a major organisation commented to us recently that there were lots of people with strong HR knowledge in the HR function but few with the business acumen or personal strength to really challenge line managers about what they were doing.

We have been talking to a number of other organisations recently who have been moving to the new business partner model and are trying to understand how to help their existing HR people make the transition. In these organisations it is again clear that the bulk of these people have strong core HR skills and yet they are struggling to make the change into new roles.

And, of course, we regularly hear the complaint, both privately and in many public forums, that HR is not given a seat at the top table nor given the respect it deserves. What we find, of course, is that where HR is making an impact, it is then given respect and corresponding influence, and that in these organisations there are one or more high performing individuals in senior HR roles.

What this means for HR people

Much has been written about what this means for HR people and most of it focuses on the knowledge and skills required, but less so (although this is gradually changing) on the mindset, attitudes and beliefs of high performers or on the motivation to encompass the new roles.

One good example (and one that reflects the general consensus in this area) is the HR professional standards for government, which focus on four core areas: Knowing the business, Demonstrating HR expertise, Acting as a change agent, and Building personal credibility. Already, we begin to see that the core HR element is only one in four broad competencies.

Taking a step further is Susan Meisinger from the Society for Human Resource Management in the recent publication: *The Future of Human Resource Management: 64 thought leaders explore the critical HR issues of today and tomorrow*. Meisinger suggests that HR people need to have the 4 Cs – competence, curiosity, courage, and caring for people; competent in HR, business, change and technology, curious about their organisation and the business environment so they can find where to have the greatest impact, courageous so that they challenge other managers to achieve the most and do the right thing, and caring about people so that they really are the most important asset.

Skills or something else?

As Meisinger says, competence must underlie everything, but this doesn't seem to be what sets apart the really high performers from the merely good. Robert Dilts in his 1996 book: *Visionary Leadership Skills*, gives us a useful framework to consider different levels at which people (or organisations) might consider making changes:

■ the opportunities and constraints offered by the environment they are operating in

■ the specific actions that they choose to take

■ their capabilities and skills

■ their beliefs about what is important, their organisation, their clients, themselves etc.

■ their view of their purpose and mission; what they are there to do, and who they think they are.

These levels can be visualised as an iceberg with only the first two above the surface, visible to others, and the remaining four being only known to the person themselves (and sometimes not even to them!).

It is interesting to note from this model that having the capability or skills, and taking the appropriate action, are not the same thing. In a different context, this is often very obvious in a sales environment where people have been trained in the skills of selling and know what to do, yet still struggle to pick up the phone to make the cold calls. There is something that gets in the way of people doing what is right and what they are often capable of doing, and this often lies in the beliefs they have about themselves and their situation.

Timothy Gallwey (one of the godfathers of coaching) in *The Inner Game of Work* talks about the fact that between

potential and performance there is interference. This interference comes primarily from the individual's own thought processes; *'a little self-doubt, an erroneous assumption, the fear of failure, was all it took to greatly diminish one's actual performance.'*

> Performance = Potential - Interference

I was recently coaching a manager in a large organisation, whose background was as an engineer and who had been promoted into a management role with a team to manage. One of the issues we talked about was how he influenced and related to other senior managers. He felt that he wasn't making the greatest impact he could with these important people and that often he would struggle to get his message across, or become flustered when challenged. We talked about whether there were situations where he was effective in similar situations and it was clear that with his own team or with other engineers he was comfortable and very successful. We explored whether there were skills that he could acquire, but the conversation changed significantly when I asked him who he thought he was when he went to meet the senior managers. Phrases like 'just an engineer' came out and it was clear that he didn't yet see himself as a senior manager or as a peer of these other people. It was what he thought about himself and his role that was influencing how he behaved; he had the skills but was not able to access them because of these limiting perspectives and beliefs.

We have also been running a large coaching programme with senior HR people in local government (with the Employers Organisation for Local Government) and at the end of this programme carried out a formal evaluation of its success. One interesting learning from this was what participants thought they got out of it. Of the 97 benefits stated by the participants, only 16% could be regarded as job or task related skills, with a further 13% under the heading of people skills. The biggest benefit perceived by the coaching clients was increased self-confidence; others included better self-awareness, a clearer understanding of their role and a more positive approach to work. So, approximately 30% could be considered as skills and the remainder more about awareness, purpose and confidence. Now this may be partly a function of the nature of coaching, but the programme was marketed as a Strategic HR coaching programme and the coaches were all experienced HR practitioners, and so it interesting that this was the balance of benefits that participants felt they received.

It is also true, of course, that many HR people are being asked to do new and different things, having spent many years developing their skills to fulfil the demand of their current roles. For many, there is a natural reluctance to

change, which comes from having invested so much in their current situation and, potentially, a fear of the unknown. Sometimes, unfortunately, this is exacerbated by the process of change itself causing some people to become entrenched or disengaged.

The way forward

This situation leads us to ask three questions:

- What does a high performing HR person look like?

- How can they be developed?

- How do we create an environment conducive to high performance?

In response to the first question, the key answers to look for are those that really distinguish the high performers from the rest. It seems reasonable to consider that these strengths might fall into one of three categories, that:

- apply to all high performing people, whatever their department or function

- are specific to HR people

- are specific to a particular role.

It might also be that some of the differentiating factors are particular to the specific organisation and its culture. For example, building internal networks is crucial in some organisations and not in others.

Like leadership, we could all come up with our own set depending on how we define high performance and what we believe about it and so as part of the process of developing high performers, we believe that organisations should develop their own set of strengths, based on what works in their organisation.

Experience suggests that it is best to have a set of strengths that are specific to a situation rather than fitting the situation to a predetermined set of strengths.

> **How to: Identify the strengths that distinguish the best from the rest**
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> If you have them in your organisation, find people who are already high performers (if not find some else-where or imagine what they would be like) and identify what makes them different. You can do this using repertory grid techniques or NLP modelling approaches. You are only looking for the differences that really make the difference not an all encompassing list of what describes the high performers, as many competency frameworks do.

> **Confidence**
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> Leading researcher Albert Bandura defines the confidence to succeed as self-efficacy and Stajkovic and Luthans have identified a highly significant correlation (0.38; much higher than other factors including goal-setting, feedback interventions and organisational behaviour modification) between self-efficacy and work performance. Bandura identifies four key approaches to building self-efficacy:
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> Mastery experiences – allowing people to experience success through a series of managed experiences
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> Social models – identifying other people like them who are successful and modelling what they do
>
> Positive feedback – focusing on what works and reinforcing this
>
> Physiological states – giving people the tools to help them manage their state and, in particular, reduce people's stress reactions turning them into positive states.

A few that you might consider which are not generally included in many competency frameworks are:

- **Confidence** – having the belief that they can succeed (see box)

- **Solutions focus** – focusing on what can be achieved rather than what can't

- **Motivation** – a desire to make a difference and continually improve

- **Flexibility** - being able to change their approach to different situations

- **Impact** – having a presence that causes people to listen to them

- **Rapport building** – the ability to understand and communicate with others

- **Resilience** – responding positively to difficult situations

- Ability to **learn and develop**

And, for HR people if not for all others too, a belief in the ability of people to achieve more than is often thought possible. (This is not intended to be an exhaustive, nor the 'right' list, just some examples.)

The next step is to take this model of high performance and help other people to learn it. From the research on how people learn and develop it is clear that the solution

is unlikely to be to send people on a single training course and all will be well; it will be a combination of different learning interventions and interactions happening on an on-going basis.

- short, sharp classroom based learning; perhaps 90 minute sessions on topics such as Solution focused problem solving, Making a first impression, Building confidence

- supported by e-learning modules to reinforce and provide further information

- highly focused coaching (group or 1 to 1) to allow reflection, build confidence and motivation

- managed experiences through specific work-based, cross-functional, simulation exercises or non-work projects

- creating a support structure or buddy network to allow people to help each other.

And all supported by an effective line manager who is focused on helping the individual develop. Research by Penny Tamkin et al. in 2003 (*Chore to Champions: the making of better people managers*) shows that the climate created by, and the support given by, the line manager is critical in the development process. This is particularly challenging to get right for people in HR business partner roles who 'sit' in the business and whose line manager may well not be an HR person.

Having put in place an on-going development process (which of course shouldn't ignore those who already performing at high levels), it is important to create a culture and environment in which people can, and are encouraged to, perform at high levels. There has been a variety of research on high performance workplaces, including the work by Becker and Huselid who identified that the key elements to create a high performance workplace are:

- rigorous recruitment and selection procedures

- performance contingent incentive compensation systems

- management development linked to business needs

- significant commitment to employee involvement and sharing of information.

Concluding remarks

The demands on HR are changing and many in HR want to respond to these demands, having a greater impact on the business. The challenge for HR people used to the 'old' world of HR (or personnel) is great and many are unsure how or whether to make the shift. Anecdotally, there is certainly a shortage of people with the right mix of skills, attitudes and personal characteristics.

We propose that it is a shift that people can make if they want to, but it is not necessarily about skills, nor one that will be solved by a traditional 'sheep-dip' approach to development. Those that do adapt to the new world and add significant value to their organisations will increasingly be given the respect and status that they desire.

About IES

IES is an independent, apolitical, international centre of research and consultancy in human resource issues.

IES aims to help bring about sustainable improvements in employment policy and human resource management. We achieve this by increasing the understanding and improving the practice of key decision makers in policy bodies and employing organisations.

We believe that HR can make a significant impact on the success of organisations of all types. In order to help bring this about, we help organisations:

- decide what they want HR to achieve

- identify what high performing HR people are like

- design and deliver bespoke development programmes for HR people

- evaluate how they are progressing against their goals.

If you would like to talk further about developing your HR community, then please contact Paul Fairhurst:

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