

Where In The World Is Human Resources Headed? - By J. Ragsdale Hendrie

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What a lonely discipline HR can be, even in the midst of Hospitality hooplah. You have been downsized, outsourced, seen as an operations barrier, mistrusted by employees, dismissed by Management. The discipline has been marginalized, you are transactional rather than strategic.

Just look at your reporting structure. Most report to Finance or Administration, which are ultimately keepers of the numbers, rather than key consultative drivers of the future. Even moving the emphasis in the discipline, from Personnel to Human Resources and now Human Capital does not demonstrate a Value - you move information and paper, which can be mechanized, leaving the incumbents breathtakingly vulnerable. And, when times turn tight, the layoffs commence with the indirect labor and support personnel. There goes Purchasing, Sales, Marketing, and, of course, Human Resources.

Almost every Business decision impacts your employees. Yet, the HR discipline simply has not engendered much faith in the Corporate Hospitality world. Over the last fifty years in most industries, Human Resources was directed to manage the vast governmental reporting and legal requirements. And, the discipline grew. As business expanded and the times were good, benefits and perquisites flourished and needed to be managed. You turned into an Employment Service, tasked to keep replenishing those warm bodies. And, the discipline grew. But, clouds were on the horizon, really starting in the late 1990's, and priorities changed, mainly to survive. So, we had a discipline which had performed diligently, but most of the work now could be outsourced or reduced to electronics. Pushing paper in a paperless environment was no longer a viable alternative, and the discipline became dismantled, diminished and disgruntled.

Recently, Deloitte, Touche, Tohmatsu issued a White Paper, 'Taking HR to the Next Level'. The analysis began with surveyed Executives (all industries) stating unequivocally (72%) that people and talent management were critical to their strategies. However, only 8% were confident in the way that their Company currently managed talent. 46% said that HR capabilities were adequate but need improvement, while 31% believed significant improvement was needed. Not quite a ringing endorsement of the discipline or a statement of confidence by business colleagues.

The Deloitte report dispenses quite a notable plan, which larger Hospitality companies may embrace. Medium and smaller companies may have some difficulty translating the plan dynamics to their operations. The transformation really begins with the incumbent, for change and value begins incrementally, a journey which starts with the leadership of the HR function.

We have some wonderful practitioners in the discipline, who chose, tacitly, to go along with the flow. They did not really learn the business, understand the financial side or even trumpet their contributions. A seat was left empty at the Executive table where strategies were formulated for not only the present but also for the future. They were not a player!

The first consideration is who holds the top post? Years ago, the President's Executive Assistant ran the function. Then, we morphed into that Junior person, who was 'good with people' and had decent administration skills. As the position had high visibility in the organization, we brought new people into the limelight, better reflecting our workforce. Management Skills were not always a requisite in this journey.

So we need to tighten up considerably our Job Specifications, attract the best and brightest, and even consider a 'stint' in HR for those Company High Potentials. Certainly one lead question for Hospitality leadership should be, 'What do you seek from your HR Executive?' Even the best candidates cannot fill a void where hard parameters are not established.

If the HR role is merely administrative, you never get out of the office. And, you never learn the business, gaining neither insight nor acceptance by your peers. This is an activist role, where you must attend operations meetings, meet vendors and guests, constantly task senior management on needs and present your solutions, and, especially, learn the P&L and budgeting. The 'financials' are the starting point and a significant means to evaluate business performance.

Lastly, HR has a marketing element, for, after all, the majority of the efforts are to influence, whether it be a labor resolution, decision making on benefit program vendors, or cool deliberation of Manpower Planning. Plus, you are typically charged with internal Communications, which requires always keeping the Company Brand forefront. Hospitality has a very public face.

You can be seen, but, if you are not heard, you become invisible. Senior Management needs to hear that by challenging each Unemployment Claim, you have maintained the minimum the State charges your account, or that with astute management of your Worker's Compensation Program, you have reduced time away from work, or even by increasing the starting hourly rate, you have reduced turnover and increased productivity. Deloitte calls these 'Value Oriented' HR Metrics, they can be quantified.

It is very difficult to have an alignment of strategies, services and capabilities, if the leader of the transformation is a lightweight. Before you invest in a Deloitte template, which is excellent, you must invest in the senior HR transformer. The old skill set is simply no longer germane, the administrative services must continue unabated, but they are not strategic in nature. The traits for success are also different. You need good business savvy, innovative thinking, excellent communication skills, a solid global perspective, laced with humor, and, perhaps, even someone from outside your business segment. Naturally, a full portfolio of HR expertise is required to address the traditional requirements, as well. The ride will be bumpy, for the status quo and behaviors will be challenged. Time to saddle up and claim the HR seat at the table!

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