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## Embracing the Human Resource Department Role in Modern Organizations

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**Abstract:** The roles of the human resource department are cross cutting and hence affect every sphere of an organization. In order for the department to develop, maintain, ensure compliance and contribute to the development of corporate HR policies; it has to be supported. This should be on areas of developing, refining and fine-tuning effective methods in selection of employees and ensuring that the organization has the right people with the desired level of competencies on board. It also has to be embraced and supported by the top management. This should be done at both strategic as well as at operational levels in both corporate and human resource planning where in conjunction with line managers action plans can be developed to help meet present and future needs of an organization.

**Keywords:** influence, role, embrace, collaboration, strategic partner, business ally.

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### INTRODUCTION

There has to be a strong link between Human Resource Management (HRM) and organizational strategies in terms of being accommodative, interactive and fully integrated both formally and informally through the Human Resource Department. The most ideal link should be where the Human Resource (HR) strategies and organizational strategies are fully integrated with each other. There should be clear reporting systems and communication relationships between the department and the high levels of management in an organization. According to Ulrich [1] the link between senior managers and HR managers can best be achieved when new roles are adopted by the HR specialists who become administrative experts, partners in strategy execution, employee champions and change agents.

Line managers should primarily undertake duties at the functional level with guidance from the HR specialists. This guidance is essential as it ensures that the line managers act professionally in handling the staff under them. This collaboration assists the HR department in ensuring that it builds a satisfied, flexible and productive workforce bringing about innovation, creativity and change. This also improves the quality of work life, legal compliance and having competitive advantage[2].

According to Nankervis, Compton, Baird and Coffey [3] HRM is a convergence of three factors which are human beings, resources and their management. HRM focuses on the overall effective management of workforce which enables contribution to the achievement of organizations' desired goals and

objectives. All HRM functions and processes should be objectively looked into and proper policies and procedures put in place to safeguard them from abuse.

### CHALLENGES

Kahnweiler [4] identified five challenges faced by the HR specialists in organizations. They include lack of power, walking a tight rope, handling skeptical managers who view the profession negatively, being vulnerable and being overwhelmed. In support of this, the society for HR management global forum on the theme 'maturing profession of human resource worldwide' [5], showed that 54.8 % of HR professionals were not held highly in their organizations [6]. In some organizations issues are even resolved without seeking counsel from the HR department which ends up being very costly to the organization for example through court cases, industrial strikes among others.

There is always the question in many organizations; how and why should a HR department exist and be embraced whereas it does not generate any profits? Why should a HR manager be a member of the senior management team whereas the department only has a skeleton staff? This is a question that continues to hamper many organizations growth because of their narrow perceptions towards HR. HR department has been seen traditionally as being more administrative than advisory; as a reinforcer of policies rather than being a policy maker. It is looked into by many people as a subordinate duty that deals with records of employees and filing of papers.

No wonder in many organizations the department is led by unqualified personnel or by people who have qualifications that are not related to the profession. In Kenya for example the Human Resource Management Professionals Act only came into existence in the year 2012; 49 years after the country attained its independence. I remember one Managing Director who once told me 'I have never understood why you keep saying the HR department is key in guiding the company in terms of policy. As far as I am concerned the role of HR department is just to keep and update personnel files'. This may be a perception that is still embraced by many managers today. Due to prevailing opinions and views, many managers do not seek counsel or have not placed competent personnel from whom to seek counsel or assistance from, until issues related to HR have reached a critical level.

The attitude of an organizations' top management towards HR department many a times sets the tone on how the rest of the organization will treat the department. This includes aspects such as how and where the HR department is placed relative to other departments within the larger organization which in turn determines how much influence the department will be able to exercise. Another challenge that the HR profession faces is that it does not have the same foundation or ground as other professions such as finance which have roots in accounting having evolved with time to become a strategic decision science [7].

This is a predicament that faces the HR professionals and hence hampering their involvement in critical issues which end up adversely affecting organizations' progress. The HR department must serve both the needs of the business as well as the needs of the employees in a fair and impartial manner as well as ensuring that employees' rights are not violated across board. This is a tricky position to hold yet failures as well as lapses by the Chief Executive Officers (CEO) in areas like compensation, handling grievances, promotion, employment and management show that the HR specialists must step out and guard ethics in organizations and integrity in leadership. It should not be construed that being a great business partner means being co-opted to allowing and to agreeing to unethical practices. Sometimes the HR specialists may be the ones who should blow up the whistle in line with their professional calling.

According to Francis; Cyril and Samuel[8] the HR professional should be credible in terms of being respected, admired and listened to as well as being active in terms of offering points of view, taking a position and challenging the status quo. They should also be the culture change stewards in professionally recognizing, articulating and shaping the corporate culture. This they can do by developing disciplines that bring about changes in strategies, projects and

initiatives. They should act as change agents by bringing about changes that have a positive impact on the organization in terms of growth and productivity. They should also act as talent managers and organization designers through mastering theories, research and practice by focusing on competency requirements and how staffs are recruited and selected, trained and developed, transferred and exit out of organizations. They should also design structures in consideration of capabilities, processes and policies that shape successful organizations.

The HR managers should be the operational executors in the management of staff. This should be done through drafting, adoption and implementation of human resource policies. They should be business allies since they understand the social context of the business operations [9].

### **KEY CONCERNS OF HR DEPARTMENT**

Key concerns for the HR department include determining the quantity and quality of employees currently and in the foreseeable future in order to satisfy or exceed set objectives. The department should come up with strategies that are most effective in order to attract, select and effectively incorporate competent employees into an organization. They also have to come up with ways and means of ensuring that the employees are well motivated to enable them to maximally contribute to organizational growth and development.

The methods as well as means of maintaining effective relationships between employees, jobs, work environment and management also fall on the HR managers. In this context they have to ensure that the voice of the employees is not suppressed while at the same time ensuring that the purposes and objectives are achieved. They have to come up with ways of engagement between managers and employees where issues can be addressed constructively for the well being of all stake holders.

In designing organizational structures the HR managers must ensure that all activities are linked and that there is accountability in terms of both inputs and outputs. This ensures the existence of cordial relationship between all departments and concerned individuals. They also have to come up with suitable systems for administering and evaluating functions. The functional areas include; human resource policy, human resource planning, human resource information management systems, knowledge management, ethics, governance and corporate social responsibility, work and job analysis, job design and evaluation, recruitment and selection, diversity management, career management, employee / management training and or development, guidance and counseling, discipline and termination/separation, performance and quality management, staff induction, reward and recognition,

staff retention, succession planning, competency building, industrial relations management, financial management of employee schemes and overall accountability and evaluation, occupational health and safety among other functions.

According to Ulrich [10] in acting as a strategic partner, the HR manager can add value through becoming a strategic partner to other line managers in execution of the business strategy, by becoming an administrative expert in efficiently organizing and planning in enhancement of cost cutting measures as well as production of quality products and services. The HR manager should also be a champion of employees by ensuring that their interests are accommodated by the management and ensuring that they are offered the opportunity to give their contributions, increase their commitment and ability to deliver results. The HR manager should also be a change agent and come up with processes and cultures that aid in the improvement of an organizations capacity to change.

For the HR professionals to function effectively as strategic business partners they will require to have leadership skills, business skills, technology skills, global mindset and high knowledge ability in terms of broadening their horizon, through seeking more knowledge and information in order to manage the human capital effectively [11]. Burton [12] observed that there is need for HR managers to be more vocal as well as influential in decision making alongside the financial and marketing managers. They should also be well equipped in quantitative skills including measurement of human work and the understanding of organizational structures as well as being conversant with diverse ways of providing effective services in organizations. They should also develop new sets of skills and competencies in terms of vision, systems thinking, organizational development and change management.

According to Anyim, Ikemefuna and Mbah [13] HR professionals should clearly articulate their roles and mandates in terms of creating value; measuring their effectiveness in terms of business competitiveness and success. All the HR functions should be linked with the other business functions in a cost effective way that reflect organizational goals and objectives. The HR manager plays a very critical role in hierarchy as well as being the link between top management and low level employees. In order to maintain and develop effective HR systems and competitive advantage the HR manager has to focus on; business objectives through structuring activities around key business objectives, focus on the environment through scenario planning on workforce issues in anticipating changes in the environment as well as ensuring that core values are embedded in key HR elements.

According to Boudreau and Ramstad [14] HR managers' roles have evolved from being only administrative functions to being strategic partners which include playing a consultative role where they coach line managers to manage resources within the relevant labour laws as well as ensuring that the organizations core values are enshrined in key business functions and elements. They should also engage strategically in partnership to ensure effective management and utilization of the human resource, tying performance appraisal and compensation to individual and team competencies as well as developing competencies that improve individual and organizational overall performance. They should put mechanisms in place to bring about increased innovation, creativity and flexibility to enhance competitiveness as well as applying new and emerging approaches to work processes, job designs, succession planning, career development and inter organizational mobility.

They also have a role of implementing and integration of emerging technologies through improved staffing, training and enhanced communication channels and systems with employees. In terms of change management, they should help in forecasting future changes; develop systems and policies for the effective management of human capital before, during and after the change as well as using the SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats) to identify HR needs and coming up with strategies to deal with each.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Some executives only expect and allow the HR department to perform minimum roles like recruitment, administering compensation and benefits as well as maintain personnel records. This is not the way to go as the HR department is one of the most important key areas to the success of any organization. This inhibits the department to maximize its potential and its contribution to the organizations goals and objectives. Where a HR manager is just left to deal with the minimum, the organization denies itself a very important resource.

The CEOs' who head or desire to lead successful organizations should establish professionally and innovative HR departments which are truly appreciated in order to utilize competent and professional services and advise. This should not be by word of mouth only but by putting required mechanisms and systems in place for example transforming the department to a full planning and decision making one and not simply a firefighter which is reactive to issues rather than being proactive. They have got to ensure that they do away with outdated systems by creating and updating the systems, keeping pace with legal demands as well as expand services of

the department becoming full partners in organizational management.

Senior managers have to ensure that the HR manager is incorporated into the management team and that the department is regarded as a professional specialty. In order for the department to perform to expected levels it should be competently staffed and led by competent people who have requisite qualifications and experience as well as drive for excellence.

That said; the HR department has to cultivate a good relationship with other departments and be clear in communication. Its' advice at times may be contrary to expectations of line managers. In following policies and state regulations it should be ideal for the HR managers to explain as well as train line managers so that not to appear to be acting contrary to expectations. This should include guidance on existing legal and regulatory restrictions that affect employment and consequences of non adherence. The HR manager should at all times ensure that there is cohesion and integration as well as ensuring that all departments are focused on the organizations goals and objectives.

The HR manager should not command but advice or make recommendations in favor or against specific actions and consequences. This should be done clearly in a tone and language that is clearly understood through advice, counseling, suggesting, recommending and at times through negotiations and persuasion. In conclusion it is important to note that in an ideal setting that ensures smooth and effective organizational relationships, the HR manager should report directly to the CEO and that the attitude of the CEO towards the HR department determines its effectiveness or lack of it. Lastly but most important the HR department should be led by competent and qualified personnel who have a passion to serve. Policies should also be put in place to ensure compliance.

If the HR department is embraced and respected it will add value to the organization as well as create a competitive advantage hence enabling meeting of organizational goals in a more effective and efficient manner. It should also be rightly placed in the organizational structure. Ignoring the departments' role may turn out to be very costly to an organization.

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