

Building HR Capacity: The Way Forward:

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Introduction:

Although South Africa does not have quantitative data on the number and qualifications of HR professionals in the country, discussions with a number of HR Directors in leading South African organisations confirm that HR Leaders, who are capable of leading the HR function of major Divisions in large companies, are a scarce skill in the country. This is despite the fact that there is no shortage of bright, young entry level graduates with social science or commercial degrees.

As a profession we need to begin a conversation about why this is the case and take measures to create the pipeline of HR leaders who are equipped to take their organisations into the future and who have the capability to influence national policy on people related issues.

Furthermore, many South African organisations, like their global counterparts, are reconfiguring the HR function to use technology to drive systems and process integration. This has resulted in new structures and roles which in turn demand new skills and attributes. Specifically, the HR professionals in the future will be required to contribute to solving complex business problems which demands a very different skill and mind set to the traditional implementation of HR processes.

I have had the privilege of running a cutting edge public programme in Strategic HR Leadership through one of the leading business schools and of facilitating a number of in house programmes for large South African organisations. This follows extensive, on-going consultation with top HR Directors in various sectors. This article aims to distil some of the key learning from this process and to provide the basis for a process to build the HR Leadership pipeline needed in the future.

Future Competencies:

An analysis of a variety of competency models available from various sources as well as discussions with leading HR directors indicate that the following characterize successful HR leaders:

- ✓ ***Personal Leadership / Effectiveness:*** this includes personal branding and the ability to be effective in a fast moving, challenging and complex environment. I often ask HR professionals to design a fictitious web site for themselves in their organisations. Most have great difficulty doing so because they have difficulty articulating who they are and what products and services they offer their internal clients. With HR increasingly filling the role of internal consultant, their ability to offer a clear value proposition and an appropriate personal brand is an essential element in building the personal credibility to fulfill the role of credible activist.
- ✓ ***Business understanding:*** for HR to provide solutions to business problems it is necessary that they understand the strategy and business model that makes their organisations work. They need to understand what HR needs to do to deliver value, not only to their internal customers, but to the organisations external customers. In many organisations, participation on an in house HR programme was the first time that they got to understand the strategic, technical, marketing and financial aspects of their own organisation.
- ✓ ***Complex problem solving and change consulting:*** the skills of complex problem solving, systems thinking, organisational design, change management and OD consulting are a cluster of competencies that are essential for HR in its new role of organisational architect. It is these skills that underpin the strategic use of functional knowledge and provide the strategic contribution of HR professionals.
- ✓ ***HR Strategy:*** the ability to create a people value proposition for the organisation through alignment of the business context and HR strategy is a key role of HR leaders. This involves a clear definition of the business and HR metrics on which HR processes need to be based. Within the context of an organisational people strategy the positioning of the HR function, processes and systems, along with other stakeholders, becomes possible.
- ✓ ***HR Issues:*** finally HR needs to interpret what are the key issues on the edge of the radar screen. These vary from organisation to organisation and include issues such as M&As, corporate governance and ethics among others. I often ask how HR functions are responding to the global challenge of climate change – it appears on few HR agendas.

Many organisations spend considerable time and money defining their competencies in great detail. Yet there are many well researched frameworks available. The Michigan / SHRM framework provides an ideal framework that organisations can use as a basis for their own specific competencies targeted at various levels.

Learning Framework:

Experience strongly suggests that simply sending individuals on a variety of courses does not build the HR capacity that is required when reconfiguring the HR function. What is required is a comprehensive learning strategy which will include the following elements:

- ✓ ***A Flagship Programme:*** Such a programme has a number of advantages. Firstly, it provides the opportunity to institutionalize key strategic competencies such as those described above into the function. In my experience it also creates internal professional networks, enable the organisation to challenge conventional assumptions and can be highly motivating for people in the function.
- ✓ ***Action Learning:*** the advantage of action learning projects is that they enable HR strategy to be developed within a learning environment or facilitate the solving of real problems thereby adding value to the business in the process. From a learning perspective they provide a holistic learning experience whereby participants are able to integrate their learning and apply it to real issues.
- ✓ ***Coaching:*** It is generally accepted that team coaching is an essential element of action learning projects but individual coaching provides the opportunity to build personal and professional effectiveness as an individual.
- ✓ ***Individual Research:*** it is essential that professionals keep at the cutting edge of their profession by continual learning and this is often done through guided processes of personal research aimed at specific outputs.
- ✓ ***Personal Career Opportunities:*** As with any leadership or professional development the most effective learning is on the job and therefore progressive organisations create opportunities for high potential professionals to experience a variety of working experiences. In multi nationals global experience is a high priority for all future organisational leaders.
- ✓ ***International Exposure:*** I recently returned from an international study school in which the group visited a number of top global companies and business schools. For many this was a life changing experience and provides an mental benchmark of global best practice.
- ✓ ***Technology:*** Finally, the use of modern technology to facilitate collaborative learning is particularly relevant for newcomers into the profession who prefer this to some traditional methods. Technology such as blogs, wikis and the use of social networking technology provide the opportunity for ongoing learning on demand.

- ✓ **Learning Support:** Finally, it is essential that the organisation provide the support necessary to ensure effective learning and provide the resources in the form of both time and other requirements for individuals to learn.

Implementation:

From my own experience of both public and in house learning initiatives, a number of key success criteria add value to the professionalizing of the HR function:

- ✓ Programmes and interventions need to be life changing from a professional point of view. Personal growth does not happen by learning content alone but by dealing with personally challenging experiences which take one out of one's professional comfort zone into new, innovative territory
- ✓ Learning needs to be properly positioned as a part of HR reconfiguration and not seen as just another course
- ✓ For effective transformation to occur the strategy needs to encompass a comprehensive change programme. If the context in which people work does not change clearly behaviour will not change.
- ✓ As with any change process, visible leadership is essential to demonstrate commitment and provide appropriate role modeling for the future
- ✓ Learning needs to be based on very specific needs analysis so that programmes can be customized and provide relevant learning experiences.
- ✓ It is important to build critical mass to ensure that change occurs in the organisation. Those organisations that have most benefited from participating in public programmes have sent up to 5 participants at a time so that learning has impact through building critical mass of learning in the organisation.
- ✓ As indicated a blended approach to learning in which a variety of learning processes are adopted and are complementary ensures systemic learning

The Future Challenge:

Whilst organisations that are serious about building HR capability within their HR function will need to adopt the approach outlined above, a key future challenge remains to build capacity within the profession as a whole.

As a result the HR Leadership Academy has initiated a conversation with leading players in the field to provide direction for the way forward. Currently, some leaders in the profession with leading organisations have participated but it is essential that during the course of next year a variety of other companies as well as academic and professional institutions become engaged in the dialogue.

It is envisaged that generic learning and career paths may emerge as well as a framework by which learning interventions at different levels are aligned.

Through such a process the HR profession will be better positioned to contribute to both organisational effectiveness as well as influence key policy decisions affecting people at a national level.

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