

Missing Links in HR

Dec 5th 2012

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I began my column in Jan 2012 on an optimistic note that HR professionals have an edge over others (even CFOs) to lead companies as CEOs, and why not? HR professionals, on account of their basic discipline and professional training, are expected to be equipped with better understanding of human processes and be more sensitive to employees, customers, stake holders and vendors. Expectedly, they need to be more authentic, committed and be above board in their dealings. In spite of high academic achievements, if HR professionals are not able to meet these expectations, they would lose credibility.

I would like to mention here some disquieting features of the HR profession that should help us reflect and take steps to build the profession and professionals:

The current trend in the turnover of HR professionals is against the spirit of the commitment and resilience required of our profession. Recently, I had the opportunity to interview candidates for the Head of HR function for a highly profitable medium sized company. Candidates with impressive academic credentials and achievements appeared (usual stuff – experience in competency mapping, performance management, assessment centre) but the commonality that was observed in the candidates was in relation to the problem of frequent job changes. For example we met a candidate with a fellow programme (equivalent to PHD) from a prestigious management institute having changed 5 jobs in 6 years . So I asked him how can he undertake HR transformation and seek commitment of employees if his own tenure is short. His response startled me. "In the first ten years, my sole objective is to build my career by way of a good package and a senior management designation," he said. I wondered what credibility such professionals can carry in the organisations they work for. And mind you, there is no dearth of HR jobs if you can boast of a degree from a prestigious management institute and working experience in some branded company even if for a short time.

Learning and experience through challenging assignments is what shapes leadership. HR professionals who are expected to manage the learning function and motivate and guide people through challenging assignments deny the challenges of learning themselves. HR has virtually become a cozy corporate function. A top HR professional lamented recently about the unwillingness of HR professionals to work on the plant site of manufacturing. Even new inductees in HR are generally averse to working at the factory level and dealing with worker affairs. This certainly deprives them of the understanding of basic human processes and motivations at the base level. Has HR become elitist in its orientation? Sermonisation and imitation of standard western HR practices do not help much unless the professionals soil their hands with characteristic organizational problems in the Indian context.

Another disturbing feature in HR is that in spite of some excellent contributions made by HR in some well known companies, the state of HR in some large and medium sized companies is simply pathetic. Some companies showing huge profits and stock exchange performance have no worthwhile HR. In some cases, there are patently illegal policies in vogue. For example in one well performing company, an employee has to forgo two day's wages for one day's absence. How do we promote professionalization of HR function in such companies? How do professional bodies reveal reality through research and impact changes?

The other cause of concern is the virtual absence of HR professionals in the huge BFSI space in the Public Sector. Barring some exceptions, the sector is averse to professionalizing the HR function. Imagine the entire banking and insurance space in Public Sector covering over a million workforces without HR professionals, with HR virtually outsourced to either trade unions or consultants. Standardized HR practices circulated by the Government rule the roost. How do we impact this sector and introduce innovations?

Again an area of concern is at the Board level with crucial issues like succession planning, pivotal skills and leadership development hardly finding place in Board discussions. Issues of diversity and development of socially disadvantaged or frontline motivation are best left to the HR department. How do we impact the Board to discuss crucial HR issues? This is challenge of HR professionals.

Lastly I should say with some concern that in spite of many conferences and published papers on HR there is hardly any connect between HR academics and practitioners. Research in HR lacks rigor and connections with the practitioner's world. One hardly gets any insight from the research in HR undertaken by our academic class. Do our HR managers know about various research studies and how these studies provide insights which could be used in improving the profession of Human Resource Development? Do our academics try to find out the real issues in work organisations and help students pick up those problems for research?

There is a clear disconnect between academics and the practicing world. There is also deficit of qualitative research studies in HR giving us insights on key and strategic issues, especially in the realm of top management and the board. Such insights can really help in the design of organisations. I say so because my PHD on my Bank's industrial relations helped me immensely in developing insights which I could use as CEO to restructure the Bank's IR system paving the way for an employee focused HR strategy.

For the growth of any profession we need to understand its ailments. Since HR holds the key to development of the country and the society, we can only ill afford neglecting the issues mentioned above. If these challenges in HR are tackled at various levels, it would help development of the HR profession in India.

The coming years should see the increasing induction of HR professionals in the industry and especially the Public Sector. Their contributions in creating sustainable organisations through durable change and transformation will become crucial. More and more CEOs coming from a successful HR background should help rapid growth of corporations through better governance & ethical standards.

To achieve this, HR professionals need to volunteer for challenging assignments be it at the factory level or business management, and involve themselves in the actual problem solving process. The profession has to move from activities to processes.

More than anything, we need reflection and continuous rejuvenation to make the profession deliver in the challenging times ahead.