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HR OF THE FUTURE

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Business-minded HR practitioners are needed to take the organisation forward

Grooming new managers for growing the company keeps **James Lim** of Becton Dickinson Holdings Pte Ltd awake at night.

Lim was working in the engineering and operations departments in the 123-year-old, S\$12 billion (US\$8.44 billion) company providing medical products since 1994. In 2007, he was appointed Executive Vice President & President, Greater Asia.

In his 21 years with the company, Lim rose through the ranks and became the first Asian in the company's leadership management committee.

It is necessary to be an authentic leader who is passionate about work, has values and leads with the heart and not the head, he said at the Panel Discussion "*Leading the Future—Developing People for Mastery and Excellence*" on October 30, 2015. The discussion was organised by the Workforce Development Agency and Singapore Management University (SMU), in conjunction with the graduation ceremony of the University's pioneer cohort of Human Resource (HR) and Leadership and People Management participants.

Moderated by SMU's Professor **Annie Koh**, Vice President, Office of Business Development and Academic Director, Centre for Professional Studies, SMU, the session was joined by four other panellists from the industry.

"My HR director is a very good strategy partner. She gives me very good feedback and tells me what I have been doing right and wrong. This is needful as most of us are very determined people and we have our blind spots," says Lim.

"The role of HR is now no longer transactional. The HR practitioner needs to understand the business, which is changing. In the past, people sell, upsell and cross-sell to increase the product portfolio. Now, hospitals are trying to solve issues pertaining to cost and patient outcomes, amongst others. We need to hire and train people to sell solutions.

“If a HR practitioner is not very interested in the business that is changing constantly and does not understand how the business is transforming, he/she cannot add value to the company’s structure, processes and talent mapping.”

ETHICS AND VALUES: SETTING THE COMPANY CULTURE

The leadership of the company needs to ensure that its compensation and benefits structure for its staff is aligned to the volatile market of Asia. The management needs to set the tone for others to follow and walk the talk, adds Lim.

“It is most difficult when you have top performers in the company who would meet their goals yearly but no one likes them. Their managers would give them good appraisals for fear of losing them even if they do not have great ethics. They are like cancer cells in the organisation because their values are not aligned to what the company stands for.

“It would take the leadership and others down the reporting line to decide on how such staff should be evaluated, and send the message across to the entire company. If they were to cross the line, there will be no negotiation in terms of compensations and benefits.”

HR IN LEADERSHIP

For **Grace Wong**, Vice President / Regional Head of HR, Samsung Asia Pte Ltd, HR has evolved from being just a support function. Practitioners can now aim for the top job.

“Today, the HR fraternity is progressing to be a trusted business partner. I remember, two decades ago, it was always the engineering director or technical head who aspired to be the next CEO, MD or president of the company. A decade ago, it would be the finance and sales directors. The time has come now for HR to take the lead. I think HR will take the business to greater heights. In Samsung, more than 20 percent of our managing directors and presidents have strong a HR background,’ she says.

Tan Lee Choo, HR Vice President, AP Global Technology Services, IBM agrees, adding that HR practitioners should keep tabs on what is happening inside and outside of the company and be champions of change.

“As we continue to focus on employees, transactions and policy administrations, I see more HR practitioners as trusted business advisors. We need to scan what is outside of the company and sense what is inside to be able to propose solutions that help solve business problems,” says Tan.

“The HR role has evolved to one that is a technology proponent. We are embracing and endorsing technology to help us become more productive. We should use technology to fulfil transactions and focus on being creative and co-create solutions or methods on how work should be done, and not how work is being done today. We can then become strong innovators and integrators with our colleagues in finance and marketing departments.”

BUSINESS-MINDED HR SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE

Data and skills are the new currency, adds Tan. “There are so much data, structured and unstructured, on the Internet, for example. It is our role to understand data to make fact-based decisions, predict trends and offer prescriptive solutions.

“Besides analytics, what I would look for in a HR practitioner are technical skills and an agile mindset or attitude. The world is changing so fast with short cycles and explosive data. In

Singapore, where the economy is open and vulnerable, many things can happen that are beyond our control. This calls for agile people who do not look for perfection before taking action. They will act, learn from it, iterate and act again.”

She recounted how she once looked at data to address staff attrition: in-house mathematicians identified high-risk employees of whom the managers may not be aware.

“On top of the HR budget that the managers have for salary increment for staff, we inform them of the employees who are very likely to leave the organisation and suggest adjusting their pay proactively. So that was HR walking the talk, using analytics that we sell to clients to retain our talent, reduce attrition and save on resources for recruitment,” says Tan. Consequently, the intervention led to a savings of S\$1.3 million, which contributed to the company’s bottom line.

Such business-minded HR practitioners are especially important to small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Often, the business owner is focused on generating revenue for a healthy cash flow while doubling up as the HR manager of the company.

Chan Chong Beng is the Chairman and Co-Founder of Goodrich Global Pte Ltd, a family-run flooring business with 500 staff. The company has offices in China, Dubai, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore and Thailand.

“As we move our business overseas, we need to manage people with different cultures and ethnic backgrounds while abiding by the various industry trade regulations unique to each country we are in. This is challenging. HR will need to connect the dots and manage the different overseas entities,” says Chan. This requires the HR practitioners to bridge employees across borders and engage them with the company.”

As technology, globalisation and the changing business climate challenge traditional roles such as HR, practitioners for the future are needed to add value to the business and safeguard the assets of the company. Besides training and experience, ethics and an open mindset to embrace new opportunities and change will help grow their profile and expertise to take the company forward.