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ALL TOGETHER: HOW TO MAKE HR PROCESSES REALLY WORK

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IDEAS IN ACTION

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Build consensus with a distinct, visible, consistent message

When the work of an organisation's HR team becomes clear and distinctive for staff within that business, it is usually a result of two specific things, says **Rhonda Brighton-Hall**, a director on the board of the Australian Human Resources Institute.

The first is that the business has a CEO and senior team that actually understand the HR function, and moreover they appreciate why people are important to the business.

The second is that the HR director and their team are acting courageously. In other words, they are balancing their role as employee advocates with the wellbeing of the organisation and the success of its strategy.

"In this way the HR role becomes distinctive within the organisation because people know and trust that the HR team will always be there to reliably support them," says Brighton-Hall, who lectures part time at the Australian Graduate School of Management at UNSW Business School and until recently held the role of executive general manager, organisation development, at Commonwealth Bank.

"If you have good knowledge of HR and good experience, and you are allowed and encouraged to apply that in the context of the business, then this is very effective and very relevant," she says. "It helps people and it makes a positive impact on the business."

CONSISTENT MESSAGES

The power of an effective HR function within a business has rarely been properly appreciated across industries. Research is proving that organisations that boast great HR capabilities benefit in numerous ways, including individual performance, team performance, staff satisfaction levels, and attraction and retention of staff whose motivators and behaviours match the organisation's strategic purpose.

Karin Sanders, a professor and head of the school of management at UNSW Business School, believes that the more distinctive and visible an HR function is within an organisation, the more consistent the message will be from that HR role. Sanders has conducted research that measures the effects of the HR function on organisational and individual performance.

"If people in a specific company always work in teams then it should be consistent from the way they hire"

– KARIN SANDERS

"So if, for instance, people in a specific company always work in teams then it should be consistent from the way they hire," says Sanders, who is also director of the Centre for Innovation and Entrepreneurship within the school of management.

"They should be hiring people that like to work in teams and who are good at it. It should be clear in performance appraisals that the business is going to appraise people on their ability to work in a team. It should be clear in their promotions and in their salary supplementations. That way, it becomes very consistent across all of the business's practices what is important for that company," Sanders says.

VISIBLE AT ALL LEVELS

The Garvan Institute of Medical Research is based in Sydney but operates within a global environment of research excellence. Simon Hamilton, Garvan's head of HR, says that in order for the organisation to continue to operate in such a competitive atmosphere, his department must ensure the organisation's values, philosophies and strategies are obvious at every level of staff interaction.

"As an organisation we undertake research to answer big scientific questions, then we translate that knowledge to clinical practice," Hamilton says.

"We set a high standard. It is all about innovation and finding new ways to look at scientific questions, or at diseases. This is very much at the forefront of how we operate.

"At the recruitment stage, the type of person we're looking for must fit a particular description, including their core behaviours. How well will they relate to the work we do? How will they fit into our culture?"

"Then, in many of our processes, such as within our performance discussions or in our criteria for promotion to senior roles, innovation is a key ingredient. We reward people who demonstrate to their peers that they are coming up with new ideas and new ways of doing things."

According to Hamilton, career progression at Garvan is underpinned by such expectations.

"When employees know what is expected of them it means you end up with really good processes"

– RHONDA BRIGHTON-HALL

"This needs to be a consistent story, a consistent message and a consistent process the whole way through the organisation, from the way we recruit, to the organisation's strategy and mission. HR processes and policies underpin that and help to support it," he says.

CLEAR AND WELL COMMUNICATED

Sanders notes that consistency is one of the three key ingredients that allow the HR function to transform an organisation. The other two are distinctiveness, as discussed above, and consensus. When explaining the idea of consensus, Sanders often refers to the family unit and to the way a set of parents may manage their children.

If you want to raise your children to be very independent by the time they are 18, Sanders says, then this must be a consistent message throughout their lives. If it is clear and well communicated then it is 'distinctive'. If the same rules and expectations are followed and enforced throughout the children's lives then it is 'consistent'. But if both parents do not appear to be in absolute agreement over the future of their children, then there is no 'consensus'.

In an organisational sense, if the firm's leaders say the business is all about innovation, but some of the line managers refuse to listen to staff ideas, and don't allow their people the time or bandwidth to do things differently, to experiment and to fail, then there is no consensus.

According to Brighton-Hall, consensus within an organisation leads to positive results.

"When employees know what is expected of them it means you end up with really good processes where the goals and the purpose of the organisation are very easily linked to what you are talking about in people's performance appraisals, and in how you are deciding who gets promoted," Brighton-Hall says.

"All of the talent processes, the recruitment processes and the reward processes make complete sense if what is expected of people is clear and consistent, and if there is a consensus in the way you are treating people. When it is done well, staff will understand what is valued and what is not. They will know what is acceptable and what is not. And as a consequence they will feel that they belong."

'WASTE OF TIME'

Sanders says that when she presents her findings, increasingly there is an understanding and an appreciation of the importance of the HR function and of its relationship to organisational performance.

She recommends that corporates take things a step further and stop spending money on satisfaction surveys, which she says are a "waste of time" because they can be influenced by so many other factors, including whether the respondent has had a good night's sleep the night before, was stuck in traffic on their way to work, or is at a low point in a personal relationship outside of work.

Sanders believes a far more valuable, accurate and useful measure of staff satisfaction is a measure of employee perception of the HR function. Is it distinctive? Is it consistent? Is there consensus? Get this right and the results can be great.

"In an organisation where this is done well, the staff are more committed to the business," Sanders says.

"Their wellbeing is higher. Their performance is higher. Staff turnover is lower and staff feel more engaged. These are all indicators for higher performance at a higher level. This means there will also be higher firm performance."