

## Management takes on more, with help from HR

*Employee communication, talent management, succession planning fall on line manager's plate*

BY MARGOT USON

Economic realities have forced many HR departments to undergo a dramatic transformation. As they are not direct profit centers, many organizations short-sightedly see HR departments as a good place to start when right-sizing business. Others have taken a more subtle approach and allowed HR departments to shrink through attrition. Finally, cost restraints have forced some smaller organizations to continue to employ a less-than-optimal number of HR employees even as the company grows.

As a result, line managers must take on more direct responsibility for HR-related activities because HR no longer has the staff resources to do all the administrative, advisory and one-on-one work.

The most important responsibility for managers is to manage their people. After all, they're the ones who deliver performance and, ultimately, success. But managers are often on their own, in uncharted waters. To assist managers taking on these new challenges, HR has to create an environment where managers are not only experts in their own field but know how to think and act like HR professionals.

HR governance now falls to managers. They must learn to optimize performance of HR assets, identify and minimize human capital risk and align a department or group with company priorities. Here are some ways line managers can work towards improving staff performance as well as their own effectiveness:

### Communication

Managers should carry a company's vision and mission to staff by adopting a wider corporate perspective, instead of a traditionally narrow departmental focus. To do this, HR needs to initiate op-

portunities to provide focused, company-related communications on a variety of key corporate topics and instruct managers on how to carry the required messages.

The ongoing success of any organization depends on communication and knowledge transfer. Line managers have a crucial responsibility to see that knowledge is shared and distributed. Managers should also make a point not to hire candidates who are reluctant to see ongoing knowledge transfer as a main goal.

Having HR develop standardized feedback opportunities and online survey tools (such as 360-degree feedback or opinion surveys) can help, but timely responses are crucial to allow managers to use the information to promote meaningful dialogue. Surveys (mini-surveys or other semi-formal data gathering) allow employees to think carefully and answer thoughtfully — this gives managers vital, current information and opinions. Once the information is available, managers must be trained to act on the feedback they receive.

### Administration, problem-solving

Learning how the HR administrative process works can provide essential knowledge for managers. Understanding pay and benefits, knowing company policies and where to access HR information are increasingly "must-haves." A good corporate intranet with all the available data and company policies can make life a lot easier for managers by putting information at their fingertips. Managers can take wider responsibility and use HR as a consulting service. In this vein, some companies are introducing wikis, where knowledge-building is an integral activity and part of the daily exchange of information.

Delivering difficult news, managing performance problems and handling appraisals all require tact and sensitivity. The delivery of bad

news will at some point become a manager's unavoidable responsibility and he must know how to deliver such news effectively, with a sensitive touch. HR should provide opportunities, through straightforward, well-conducted performance management processes and managerial training, for these skills to be learned as an essential part of the managerial tool kit.

Managing inappropriate employee behaviours rarely has a positive outcome unless HR acts as an internal consultant to coach managers on company regulations and local laws. Once the manager understands these, he can often manage the situation without HR intervention.

To make people management more effective for line managers, HR needs to make sure managers can operate many of the HR systems. These may be recruiting processes, to recruit more independently and effectively; compensation, so corporate financial restrictions as well as fairness and equity are observed; or effective performance appraisals, for better people management. The outcome will be improved time and cost management for the business and managers, without the need for constant HR support.

### Identifying, retaining top talent

It is difficult to retain highly talented employees unless managers know how to effectively manage them. Coaching managers to think in terms of talent identification and retention requires an understanding of the basic principles of talent management. This is a concept that is not intuitive — it must be learned by managers with help from an HR coach.

Frequently, managers are the cause of strife within their team. When they recognize this and engage in some thoughtful analysis of the problems they create for themselves and others, solutions are much easier to find. HR can help by developing a standard

training curriculum for management to follow.

Creating a succession planning process goes a long way to identifying top talent within an organization. Career development and appropriate learning and development mechanisms, created by HR and managed by managers, are two of the best ways to keep good talent from walking out the door. A solid succession plan should identify key jobs and key talent, mesh with a company's goals and timing, and lay the groundwork to develop the talent to meet future needs. Solid succession plans develop escape routes and disaster-recovery plans if a key employee leaves.

### The best investment

Developing staff and investing in the management strength of an organization takes work, time and financial resources. Creating a corporate culture where managers are expected to manage by using the values of the company will show managers the solution is a joint one — managers and HR need to be fully implicated.

HR professionals must also rethink the way they have always managed the HR function and make HR more transparent to the rest of the business. They need to develop easy-to-use systems and manageable processes for line managers to clearly understand and apply. HR practitioners must learn to think of themselves as facilitators and coaches and lead the way to a continuous learning environment.

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