

## A place for everyone and everyone in their place

I was in an HR presentation last week where someone reminded me about the dangers of woolly HR initiatives in an organisation. In the middle of a discussion on company drivers one delegate informed the group that her organisation had re-designated them as transport officers, considered more respectful. That's not as daft as you think, in the UK a chimney sweep now likes to be referred to as a Flueologist, the humble dustman is a Sanitation and Recycling Engineer, whilst a Dispatch Services Facilitator is the euphemism for a post office worker. Serious!

In this new, politically correct workplace everyone's job title has to be talked up, it seems, though I am not always sure what the rationale is for assigning fancy names for functions. Strange as it may seem I understand that some people would rather have a grander job title than a pay rise and while this may seem astonishing, upgrading job titles is becoming more and more popular as employers simultaneously try to keep their costs down and their staff happy. Embarrassingly, HR is normally behind such initiatives and as a result there is a perceived fine line between effective HR advice and HR baloney. No wonder we are not always taken seriously. We have only ourselves to blame.

In another discussion it was mentioned that HR Business Partners (what transport officers are to drivers, so Business Partners are to HR Managers) should be conversant with financial matters and other line functions in order to sit respectfully at the boardroom table. Nonsense - let's get one thing straight; HR people should not and do not NEED to become experts in the 'other areas' of the business to gain credibility from management. Their own specific function has gravitas enough of its own to justify their presence in the Boardroom and often this perceived need to be a generalist and talk other people's talk dilutes the HR function. By becoming generalist they lose their specialist knowledge.

'Business partners' – generalists who sit at the big table next to business leaders and help them implement general HR solutions need to be specialists in at least one of the HR "silos" – compensation, benefits, industrial relations, performance management etc. Generalists should have a specialty... and specialists should also be generalists. No matter how long they've worked in their speciality they should NOT fail to review all other aspect and propose in generalist HR terms.

Yet the notion that HR managers should be competent in other areas of the business is nonsense. Why did we elect to study social sciences instead of a B. Com in the first place? Presumably because it interested us and we felt we had a talent for and affinity to the subject, whereas general business studies didn't appeal. And doesn't the same thinking apply throughout? The marketers don't want to step over to get experience in HR. Similarly the finance guys don't want to get any experience in marketing and certainly not in HR because, after all, finance is the ultimate key to the business and so on across the management food chain. Deep down every specialist manager needs to feel that their department is crucial and that they alone know how it best works. Except, it seems, for some HR people.

When I hear HR stressing the need to appreciate and understand all aspects of the business it concerns me for two reasons. Firstly for the self-deprecating implication that all other functions are somehow more important and secondly because it implies that there is a need to spend time in the territories of others when no-one ever feels the need to reciprocate - no one is ever seconded to the HR department to understudy us or learn the intricacies of our role.

I believe the main problem with HR function today is that it has lost its way. HR's role is to co-ordinate and utilise the company's human resources to improve corporate performance. You are not the social convener, company clown, or therapist, nor are you the travelling departmental trouble-shooter and adviser. HR within the corporation should be valued for contributing effective people and people management skills, not for being able to grasp the generalities of other departmental functions. HR managers, Business Partners or whatever title you want to allocate need to be allowed to carry on measuring and presenting performance and input and that in turn needs to be accepted and respected at the senior levels.

HR is about people – the most important, often unpredictable and dynamic asset the company has. As such it is in many ways harder to understand and affect than money in finance and products in manufacturing and requires a highly sensitive approach. In consideration of that HR needs to be left alone to put into place the positive techniques and tools that have been proven to enhance the workforce. Performance management ranks high on how the HR experts can determine how much each employee is worth, who to fire, who to promote and even – after tracking trends in employee types – who to consider for recruitment.

The use of metrics, evaluations and rigorous employee review interviews helps to create an accurate snapshot of the workforce which is then used to optimise productivity and efficiency within the employee base. These are the issues we should be grappling with – not silly issues like euphemistic name changes and trying to prove to the finance people they're not the only ones who can read a balance sheet. Can they read the sub-text in a personal profile or employee assessment? Well, we can.

