

THE HR LEADER OF THE FUTURE: A CONTRARIAN VIEW

Will what got us here get us there? Probably not!

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Prior to the current meltdown the Sage of Omaha, Warren Buffet observed that “on an incoming tide all boats rise; but when the tide goes out, we will find out who has been swimming naked.” Today he would probably make the rejoinder that “when the tide comes back in it will come in to a quite different beach and to different boats.” So when we experience the recovery, as we surely will, we will not be able to go back to the future of 2007. Many aspects of our future will be qualitatively different and represent either threats or opportunities depending on your worldview.

In this article I will argue that adopting a linear approach to forecasting the HR leader of the future could continue to limit our contribution and fail to respond to opportunities to add a step change in value. After all Edison didn't invent the light bulb by using a bigger candle. If we rise to this challenge, we may be able to not only deal with the current criticisms and limitations of the HR leader role and contribution, but also to create new occupational categories and roles which offer breakthroughs that parallel the benefits of new organizational forms.

A starting point is to consider whether some of the current developments in our markets, industry and organizational structures represent cycles or trends. This distinction is critical. For example, do rising temperatures and water levels reflect environmental cycles: no cause for great concern, nature will correct itself. Or do they represent a human engendered trend that must be reduced if our quality of life is to be protected? I will argue that incremental or even linear changes to our understanding, definition and expectations of organizational leadership will be inadequate to fulfill the needs of either organizational stakeholders or the wider society that increasingly relies on organizations for productivity and positive work experiences.

It is timely to observe that our history is littered with the wrecks of societies, industries and organizations that failed to adapt and reinvent themselves. The United Kingdom languished in the 1950s 60s and 70s as it failed to restructure its industries in the aftermath of World War II. Margaret Thatcher's ultimate intervention was painful and

disruptive. In sharp contrast Lee Kwan Yew managed to lead the reinvention of Singapore on three separate occasions. Similarly the music and newspaper industries are currently struggling to survive in their present form whilst Apple and Google have leapt into a new generation of delivery. In 1973 General Motors was the world's largest corporation; today is fighting off Chapter 11. Blacksmiths have all but disappeared; printers, mechanics and dentists have all had to reinvent their skill sets and roles to maintain their relevance. So the clear risk is that when the rate of change outside a society, industry, organization or occupational group is greater than the change inside, the end is in sight. So how can HR leaders think for one moment that they are exempt from the same forces? Or that fine tuning the role, skill set and contribution will meet the challenges of change?

As the Chinese remind us change represents both threat and opportunity. At one level many HR leaders are threatened by marginalization or lack of relevance and impact. Either their reporting relationships are to a CFO or Corporate Services Manager or there can be a failure by the whole Executive Team to accept collective accountability for the people space. Search consultants complain about the lack of an adequate pool of credible and high potential HR leaders. In the absence of supply, organizations will move and are moving to other solutions to people thought and practice leadership.

From the perspective of opportunity we have the possibility of using the current pliability in thinking and organizational practice to create a discontinuity in how we define an occupational group. For too often old occupational categories can reflect the needs, knowledge and skill base of the past rather than either the needs of the present or the future. Witness how the titles of "doctor" and "nurse" fail to capture developments in medical knowledge and practice and so result in silos that continue to plague hospital effectiveness and good patient care.

So what might one possible future look like? Biology has demonstrated for us the benefits of hybrid vigor: the combination of genetic streams that create a new whole that is greater or more powerful than just the additive sum of the parts. Complex scientific, societal and organizational problems have created the need for multiple perspectives to understand the complexity and add increased value through the interactive effects of different bodies of knowledge. We are witnessing the development of many hybrid university degrees: law and commerce, biology and engineering, philosophy and IT. By combining theories and perspectives these graduates can add value in ways that go beyond unitary disciplines. And so to the HR occupational

group. At one level the integration of finance and accounting with HR opens opportunities to do more effective cost benefit analyses of organizational initiatives and net present values for HR capital investments. Integrating HR with IT could produce more effective modeling, problem solving heuristics and artificial intelligence in the people space. And combining marketing with HR could produce the integration of corporate and employment brands that provide seamlessness between member behavior and the experiences promised to our clients or customers. Hybrid vigor at this level is not difficult to conceive. So why would we defend a historical and pure HR occupational category when a hybrid might provide more relevance to emergent organizational issues, better integrative thinking, more holistic solutions and fewer cross silo turf wars ? All of this is not to preclude the continuation of HR specialists. It just means that we will need some new job titles to reflect new roles and contributions.

So let's take these ideas up to the role of the HR leader. It is possible to conceive of an executive role that integrates marketing, people, and external stakeholders/ corporate relations and that spans both organizational performance and adaption. If we can identify or develop leaders who are multidisciplinary in their skills and holistic in their thinking, they would have the potential to act on organizational problems and decisions in ways that create integrative solutions and more effective outcomes through the alignment of action. In turn this reduces the span of control of CEOs and enables smaller executive teams, outcomes that have been shown to lead to better organization performance.

So where might we find these role breakers? Probably from fringe dwellers in fringe or emergent industries. Consider the lessons of history. In the Industrial Revolution the breakthroughs in iron and steel, confectionary, banking and cleaning products often came from Quakers: fringe dwellers who were not subject to the pressures for conformity that characterized mainstream society and religious denominations. Furthermore we could prepare these leaders through cross disciplinary education and cross silo career development. In turn we should encourage cross functional conferences where bodies such as AHRI join with other groups to foster knowledge transfer and multiple perspectives on common problems and decisions.

So CEOs, Boards and we must be prepared to experiment knowing that early attempts may be less than satisfactory. After all Edison made some 4000+ attempts before he produced a satisfactory light bulb. In these experiments we should take courage in the knowledge

that such transformations have characterized the history of HR. What began as Welfare evolved into Personnel Administration and then Personnel Management, Human Resources, Human Capital and beyond. However this time we will have to be prepared to both accept and apply qualitatively different knowledge and patterns of thinking and give up some of our turf to achieve genuine breakthroughs. Sir Edmund Hillary put it succinctly when he said " It is not the mountain that we have to conquer, but ourselves."

There is mounting evidence that what has got us here will not get us there.

So instead of adding more competencies to the HR Leader role or extending its reach, the current disrupted and disruptive environment offer a discontinuity where we can make fundamental changes in our understanding and expectations that create the potential for a step change in value creation. Courage, imagination, patience and persuasion are needed for pathfinders to build a better future. Are you up to this challenge? Or to paraphrase Ashley Brilliant: will you find it easier to continue to be a result of the past or a cause of the future?