

Managers and employees perceptions of the effectiveness of the HR Function in building Employee Engagement within Government Museums in Qatar

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Introduction

The topic of employee engagement remains central to many HR academic and practitioner debates. Whilst the origins of the term Employee Engagement (EE) can be traced back to Khan in 1990, the MacLeod Report (2009) prompted further interest in the UK. Whilst the concept of EE has academic interest and research attached to it, the question arises as to what role the Human Resources function has in nurturing, developing and reaping the benefits from EE.

The main research objectives (ROs) of this investigation were:

1. How do managers and employees perceive the effectiveness of the HRF?
2. Who do managers and employees believe is responsible for Employee Engagement and what is Human Resources role?

Employee Engagement

Kular et al (2008 p3) argue that “the existence of different definitions makes the state of knowledge of employee engagement difficult to determine as each study examines employee engagement under a different protocol.” Therefore multiple definitions of EE exist, driven by academics, theorists and management consultants using their own measures. Truss et al (2012) acknowledge this dilemma and conclude that a way in which to differentiate practitioner and academic literature is to propose that from an academic perspective, EE is a state experienced by an individual in the workplace, whilst a practitioner uses the term engagement to refer to workplace engagement activities which are developed to raise engagement levels.

Although there have been academic contributors to the topic of EE such as Khan (1990) and Sacks (2006), there has been little agreement by researchers on the precise meaning of EE.

HR's Role in Employee Engagement

Shuck et al (2011) argue that HR must drive the EE agenda through promoting the link between employee performance and its impact on business goals and HR's role in instigating changes in attracting, selection and retention practices in order to focus on the EE agenda.

Brooks (2010) argues that in order to enhance EE, an organisation must focus on their customer, strategic direction and leadership, frequent and clear communication and rewards, training and development. Brooks (2010) states that HR can intervene and give managers support with EE by guiding them on how to interact with their teams and by creating a manager engagement toolkit to increase engagement. This author also believes that HR can play a highly influential role in collating and communicating stories of organisational

achievements and states HR are the best placed function to facilitate this across the organisation.

Robertson-Smith and Marwick (2009) cite Johnson (2004) in their study who argue that engagement can only succeed when there is collaboration between HR and Line Managers. They conclude that HR should have transparent and fair policies that Line Management has a good understanding in.

Truss et al (2012) believe that HR will be called upon to develop EE strategies to improve engagement and believe that, as a central plank, HR can consider interventions around performance management, rewards, training, and employee voice in order to create an organisation climate which is contributing to EE. However, these activities must be in alignment with the overall people strategy of the organisation which supports the organisation's strategic goals.

Research Methodology

This investigation focused upon how employees attached their own interpretations and meanings to aspects of their work environment, and their interpretation of how they view this environment. By adopting an interpretivist approach, differences between respondent's answers were explored. A combination of methods were used to gather data including data from a recent organization employee engagement survey and a selection of semi-structured face to face interviews from a purposive sampling method, resulting in 10 respondent interviews being conducted. The participants came from 5 museums within Qatar.

Research Findings

RO1: How do Managers and Employees perceive the effectiveness of the HR Function?

Although each museum is at a different stage of evolution, the participants were consistent in how they perceive the effectiveness of the Human Resource function (HRF). Managers specifically perceive the HRF's effectiveness through the way in which it applies fairness in HR policies and practices, as well as wanting effective two way communication (MacLeod and Clarke, 2009; Brooks, 2010). Managers may be exposed to complaints from subordinates regarding unfair treatment about salary, benefits and allowances and this participant group may have higher expectations of HR in ensuring fairness in their practices, to limit the complaints from staff. Alternatively, managers may have directly received or witnessed unfair treatment, and wish to highlight this for focused attention. The findings also reinforced managers' desire for two-way communication from HR, which is critical for any service provider. Managers are seeking effective verbal and written communication in order to improve relations with HR (Brooks, 2010).

By contrast, employees perceive the HRF's effectiveness through how it supports and facilitates managers and employees to do their jobs, and highlights the support role required by HR. Whilst specific support requirements may evolve over time, the employees are seeking HR to provide a consistent support service. The primary data research indicates that HR issues can prove time consuming, especially as the organisation's HRF is in a different location to the Museum employees, which can mean spending several hours resolving what

may be a simple or complex HR issue. For employees, HR needs to provide an efficient responsive service which in turn impacts how employees perform in their jobs.

The research reveals consensus amongst managers and employees that HR is effective when its delivery is primarily focused on protecting employee rights. As this was the only finding not prominent in the literature review, it could be directly related to the fact that the majority of research participants are living in Qatar, where they have negligible employment law rights and are seeking HR to perform the role of protector.

In terms of the HRF increasing its effectiveness through adding value, the research findings uncover a difference between the views of managers and employees. Managers perceive HR adding value through efficiently supporting the museums, so that the museums staff can deliver what they are required to. This view is supported by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) who believe the HR profession adds value when it supports others to reach their performance goals. This research finding reinforces the need for the HRF to efficiently support the museums and perform the role of an enabler in terms of providing the right support for the museum staff to meet their goals and objectives.

However, the most critical way the HRF can add value to the museums, as perceived by employees, is through providing learning and development opportunities. This view is reinforced by Brooks (2010) who states the importance of learning and development and its positive impact on EE. The research reveals there is a constant need for museum employees to enhance their technical skills and keep their skills up to date in order to add value and perform well in their roles. Therefore, learning and development opportunities will be of utmost importance to employees, as they continue in their professional development and contribute to the performance of the museums. As the budget and process sits with the HRF within the case study organisation, there is a clear call for HR to ensure they analyse the learning and development needs of the museums and provide the technical development opportunities the museum staff need in a timely manner.

RO2: Who do Managers and Employees believe is responsible for Employee Engagement and what is HR role?

The research highlights agreement between managers and employees that HR policies and procedures have a motivating and demotivating impact within the work environment. However, the negative impact can be mitigated through increasing awareness of HR policies and procedures in order to manage the expectations of all staff. Gatenby et al (2008) support this finding and assert that HR policies and procedures have a direct impact on employee engagement. The HRF must therefore ensure transparency around policies and practices and use creative ways to raise awareness and understanding amongst all levels of employees.

Managers and employees perceive the individual and their line manager as having equal accountability for engagement, with HR also playing a support role. Kahn (1990) acknowledges the importance of the individual in determining levels of engagement or disengagement, whilst Shuck et al (2010), focused their research into the influence of the line manager on levels of employee engagement. The research indicates that individual engagement can be encouraged and fostered by an engaged line manager whose role it is to ensure open communication channels and to give the right support at the right time. As evidenced by the EE survey results, managers in the organization are already doing well in supporting employees and this area can be improved further by HR giving structured support

to managers in how to interact with their teams and further increase levels of engagement (Brooks, 2010).

In terms of HR's role in EE, the research participants agreed that HR needs to positively influence EE through providing an efficient service to support the museums to deliver what they need to and by increasing awareness of HR policies and procedures to manage expectations.

Recommendations

1. Conduct a HR role assessment survey with employees and management to capture their expectations on HR Divisions service priorities and requirements.
2. Develop and implement retention and engagement strategies that align HR and Business Strategies.
3. Further develop an organizational culture that values all employees and provides a supportive and motivating learning environment focusing upon communication, performance, career development and employee involvement.
4. Following a thorough training needs analysis, implement a skills development programme.
5. Arrange quarterly drop in sessions on HR policies and procedures.
6. Provide a dedicated HR helpline for employees.
7. Increase competences of line management so as to encourage engagement across the organisation.
8. Introduce employee voice initiatives.
9. Follow on with timely further Employee Engagement Surveys.

Conclusions

Despite some of the limitations of the interview sample size within this study, interesting findings and areas for future research emerged. The debate around employee engagement will continue to run. Perhaps the greatest question lies within the role of HR and how it can make a positive impact upon both employees and performance.

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