

# The HR specialist as an agent of change

## *Skills that open up a place at the company's top table*

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**T**he current business world requires top management to be flexible and always prepared to introduce change. Human resource (HR) management is responsible for easing the effect of change in organizations and protecting employees against some of the unwelcome side effects (Ulrich *et al.*, 2005).

The change agent must use his or her knowledge of the employees, and essential change-management techniques, to minimize the costs of transition and help to introduce the changes as smoothly as possible. HR specialists have to identify potential pockets of opposition and reassure them throughout the change process (Gómez-Mejía *et al.*, 2009).

HR functions most effectively when it is part of the leadership team, focusing on overall business priorities rather than just personnel issues. When this works well, the HR specialist has enormous influence on the change process (Sartain, 2010).

Several recent studies, however, have indicated that many HR specialists are failing to fulfil their potential as change agents (Rees and Johari, 2010; Selmer and Chiu, 2004; Khatri and Budhwar, 2002; Khatri, 1999). Long and Ismail (2008) further claim that Malaysian HR specialists in the manufacturing sector still focus on such traditional HR roles as administrative expert and champion of employee welfare. Will HR specialists ever stake their claim to be effective change agents?

### **The impact of HR competencies on the change-agent role**

Huselid *et al.* (1997) identify the professional and business-related competencies important for effective HR management. They argue that, although professional HR management competencies are necessary to ensure technical HR management effectiveness, professional competencies alone are not sufficient to enable the HR specialist to be a strategic partner and change agent. Business-related competencies are also important because they enable the HR specialist to understand how business considerations unique to an organization can create organization-specific HR management needs.

Buchanan and Boddy (1992) carried out a study on the perceived effectiveness of change agents. They argue that change agents should have good communication skills, team-building abilities, goal setting and influencing skills.

Lawler and Mohrman (2003) support view that HR specialists who want to be change agents need to be expert in understanding business strategy and ways to support its implementation. However, the authors reveal that HR specialists get most job satisfaction from exercising their traditional HR skills, and least satisfaction from using their skills as business partners. One core HR skill is HR development. Implementation of change in an

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organization requires proper human-resource development programs to be executed (Werner and DeSimone, 2009).

A study by Pietersen and Engelbrecht (2005), on the strategic-partnership role of HR managers in South Africa organizations, supports the claim of Brockbank *et al.* (1999) that strategic contribution, personal credibility, business knowledge and HR technology competencies are pivotal to HR being an effective change agent. Long and Ismail (2008) also find that culture management plays a key role in helping HR specialists to become effective change agents.

Ulrich and Eichinger (1998) emphasize the importance of HR specialists embodying the values of their firms. Personal credibility is particularly important in interpersonal relationships, creativity and analytical approaches to problem solving (Selmer and Chiu, 2004).

Guttman (2009) argues that the skills, organizational position and experience of HR specialists make them uniquely qualified to make high-level contributions to team performance. HR specialists can be successful change agents if they take the initiative and apply their skills to teams at every level. Beginning with the senior executive team, they need to ensure that these leaders are proficient at achieving results, navigating conflict and moving to a significantly higher level of operation

### **Critical competency skills of HR specialists**

These studies clearly show that HR specialists need to possess certain competencies to be a change agent – competencies that must add value to a business and lead to attainment of sustainable competitive advantage.

#### ***Culture management***

Managing culture is a central responsibility of HR leaders. This must be an ongoing process if they are to function effectively in ever-changing markets, meet customer needs and keep pace with the competition.

#### ***Effective relationship and communication skills***

HR specialists must be credible to both their HR counterparts and the line managers they serve. They need to deliver results and establish a reliable track record. HR specialists must be able to work well with others. They must also have good writing and verbal-communication skills (Boselie and Paauwe, 2004).

#### ***HR development***

HR specialists need to ensure the smooth implementation of systematic employee training, career development, performance management and development, coaching, mentoring, succession planning and organizational development. Furthermore, HR specialists as change agents need to understand the learning process and how to create an environment that facilitates learning (Ketter, 2006). Healthy organizations believe in human-resource development and HR specialists play a key role in making this take place in their organization (Werner and DeSimone, 2009).

### *Performance management*

Performance management unites goal setting, performance appraisal and development into a single, common system whose aim is to ensure that employees' performance supports the company's strategic aims (Glendinning, 2002). Performance management can only be successful if it is jointly executed by HR specialists and line managers. HR specialists who play a change-agent role need constantly to be alert to ways of improving employees' productivity and work performance. HR also needs to ensure that proper tools are used to measure employees' performance (Dessler, 2008).

### *Value-chain knowledge*

To become change agents and key players in the organization, HR specialists must understand the business of the company they serve and how it operates. This includes the organization's strategy, how the organization makes money or achieves its primary purpose, its technological processes and organizational capabilities. Therefore, HR specialists should develop their knowledge of such areas as finance, marketing, operations and general management (Heisler, 2003).

### *HR technology*

HR specialists need to be able to make optimum use of information technology. Dessler (2008) reveals that many large companies operate integrated human-resource management systems, which collect, process, store and disseminate information to support decision making. By implementing the latest technology, HR specialists can project a forward-looking image that will help them to earn the respect of others in the company (Mukherjee, 2001).

### *Conflict management*

By assuming a key role in helping teams to learn to manage conflict, HR specialists can gain greater exposure, make a more substantial impact and contribute significantly to business success (Guttman, 2009).

### **Conclusion**

HR specialists need to work diligently to promote a positive culture in their organization. They must learn to develop plans that take their company from where it is to where it needs to be, given the nature of its culture.

HR specialists need to be actively involved in operational matters. This will help them to understand more fully the relevant issues and to assist line managers in improving efficiency. HR specialists must continue to acquire knowledge of their firm's business, such as the key business disciplines, an understanding of the internal and external customers, knowledge of competitors, products, technology and sources of competitive advantage. Therefore, HR specialists must start learning to work effectively with other departmental managers in order to achieve the organization's common financial goals.

Organizations must come to understand the importance of HR technology and begin to conduct comprehensive research into the possible investment in HR software that will best suit the organization's needs. HR specialists must not only be competent in using HR systems but must also be capable of measuring the effectiveness of HR systems and practices.

HR specialists who fail to master these competencies may jeopardize their opportunity to climb the corporate ladder. Furthermore, inability to function as change agents will limit their ability to perform as a well-integrated strategic partner.

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#### *Keywords:*

Organizational change,  
Change management,  
Human resource  
management,  
Strategy,  
Senior managers,  
Information technology,  
Organizational culture

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