

HR DIRECTORS LEADING FROM THE BASS LINE?

If HR Directors suffer from a lack of strategic involvement, it may be because they manage the resource aspect to the detriment of the human dimension of their function. Their position and profile are ideal for activating a performance catalyst as important and strategic as innovation – the organisation’s culture.

Once upon a time there was a Promethean hero (the HR Director) who wanted to transmit to mankind the benefits of fire, but he was unable to lay hands on it. Zeus (the Director-General) had confiscated it in the meantime, to some extent aided and abetted internally. – This will spare you liver problems, his colleagues in the Director-General’s office told him. – But it is my faith and my function that will be eaten away, replied the disillusioned HR Director. Then he withdrew into his HR service (not as hard but also not as solid as a rock) and meditated on this paradox: how is it that the management of human resources is becoming increasingly strategic while this is less and less the case for the function of HR departments?

This tale is not a myth for many HR departments, according to Emery and Gonin,¹ citing the results of the “HR barometer” survey published by HR Today in 2008: “HR Directors consider that they are only intermittently involved in strategic decisions; they deplore the absence of clear objectives and frequently suffer from a lack of means”. Any attempt to comprehend this lack of strategic involvement is tantamount to raising the question of what competences, contributions and specific and strategic information are available to Human Resources but are not in the possession of any other internal actor. While it is a verifiable fact that salary management, training, conflict management, recruitment or profile selection are HR functions that can be contracted out, and that the requirements relating to them are often better identified by line managers, the question arises as to whether it is not then natural for the HR Director and his service to be subordinated to major decisions. Some companies even decide to do without an HR Director. An example is Semco, a Brazilian company of 3000 employees under Ricardo Semler who has delegated all HR functions to members of the company on the grounds that the HR service was not in touch with reality on the ground.²

A glimmer of hope is to be found in a strategic dimension which is still endeavouring to find an emissary to promote it within the company: the culture of the organisation. James Heskett³ defines it as “the way we do things around here” and “a mix of ideals, concepts and actions [...] with nothing soft or abstract about it, an essential factor in enabling strategies and ways of executing them successfully”. An organisation’s culture resembles an iceberg. The visible part, which is easier to change, is made up of widespread practices and behaviours which interact with the invisible component of shared values, symbols and core norms. These deeply-buried cross-cutting intangibles are very difficult to alter. They are influenced by other intangibles, notably the organisation’s mission and its leaders’ vision.

¹ Y.Emery and F.Gonin (2009), *Gérer les ressources humaines*, Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes, page 53

² R.Semler (2004), *The Seven-Day Week-End*, Arrow Books, page 58

³ J.Heskett (2011), *The Culture Cycle – How to shape the unseen force that transforms performance*, FT Press, pages 17 and 317

Kotter and Heskett⁴ comment that culture can equally be a factor of performance or of failure. The mission of “Service” in a government administration, the symbolic dimension of a doctor’s status in a hospital, or the value of “Discretion” in a bank may, for example, occasion both positive and counter-productive practices. In an administration, according to Edgar Morin, serving is only one step away from being enslaved. In a hospital “putting the patient at the centre” remains an illusion if it widens the gap between medical disciplines. And in a bank, when discretion becomes a culture of secrecy, it may unravel the solidarity and the trust of the employees.

The invisible force that is culture may become as powerful a catalyst of performance as innovation, provided that it gives rise to the capacity to evolve, to adapt to change, to find coherence between a strategy and its context, while preserving the “memes” that reinforce the organisation’s identity and the link with its staff and clients. For a culture like this to emerge, it needs leadership. Who more suited than a Director of Human Resources, man or woman – often fashioned by the humanities – to harness themselves, in partnership with the Director-General, to the task of developing the visible aspects – behaviours and practices – in order better to be the incarnation of those that are invisible – core values, a mission, a vision?

An organisational culture becomes a strategic force when it favours the integration of changes of paradigms while evolving along with them, when it facilitates the hybridisation of contradictory systems, when it generates emulation among co-workers who find themselves building new forms of equilibrium and resolving new dilemmas. Some of the changes which concern most organisations are equally cultural challenges. Firstly, time supersedes money as the prime value of capitalism, on the one hand inspiring part-time and flexi-time policies, and on the other more flexible contractual relations. Secondly, self-management supersedes chains of command, requiring the rethinking of decision-making and training processes, the redistribution of responsibilities and the reduction of sequential interdependence in which tasks are subdivided as in the assembly line, paving the way for a reciprocal interdependence that stimulates interactions among “craftsmen”, more motivated because they master a process from start to finish. Thirdly, transversality supersedes verticality, engendering matrix structures in which there is more network-style working and fewer levels of hierarchy. Fourthly, the leadership approach supersedes management at middle-management levels. However, although the aim of leadership is support, inspiration, the giving of meaning and the power to act to co-workers, it also needs to cohabit with the attributes of management: the control, the planning and the autocratic approach that are sometimes necessary. Fifthly, the symbolic dimension supersedes the utilitarian dimension as a factor in the choice of a product, a service or a company, with a need to increase their desirability without any lessening of the requirements of quality and innovation. Lastly, creativity supersedes productivity, requiring experience of how to mark time in order to foster the emergence of creativity, while keeping control of time so as to meet productivity criteria.

⁴ J.Kotter and J.Heskett (1992), *Corporate Culture and Performance*, The Free Press

Having obtained at least 20 per cent of free time over five years, the HR Director could start with the collection of information on the ground by practising “leadership by walking” and all the approaches that enable him to become more familiar with the values and the recurrent actions that characterise his organisation. At the same time, he should buckle down to ensuring the development of practices and behaviours by a group of actions which, although modest, are coherent and in keeping with the values of the organisation and the strategy of its leaders. In this way he would in a manner of speaking become the bass player of a jazz quartet, who, while hardly audible, in a low register and at the service of the ensemble, makes a strength of his weakness. He supports the entire musical structure with a “walking bass”, a bass line that carries the harmony and the swing. His leadership does not derive from being in the limelight but from the consistency of his activity in the background. Thanks to him, the Financial Director (the drummer, custodian of rhythm), the Director-General (the pianist, custodian of harmony), and the saxophone (the incarnation of all human melodies) are better able to deploy their potential in the long-term.

If a HR Director can act on the organisational culture in order to accompany change, if he can reinforce performance through the joy generated by a living culture, the fact of the uniqueness of his contribution will render his involvement all the more strategic. He will have found fire and achieved his vocation, expressing to the full the human dimension of his office.

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