DINOSAURS OR DINAMOS

Entrepreneurial Skills for the Future of HR: HR Leadership and the Power of Culture

by Lynne Eisaguirre

A client called me recently—the CEO of a high-tech company. For several years, my company has provided consulting and training services to his company. He’d finally decided to fire his CFO—a man who was technically brilliant but lacking in “people skills.” Employees complained constantly about the CFO’s abusive, abrupt and intimidating manner.

When the CEO delivered the news that he could no longer defend the manager against the rising tide of employee complaints (and even one pending lawsuit), the CFO’s surprised response is typical of many I hear in today’s workforce: “In some companies, my style would be considered an advantage! People around here are just too sensitive!”

Another client decided to upgrade the computer department in his company from data management to a true information technology department. On the advice of a head-hunter, he hired someone from a large computer firm, an old-fashioned hierarchical company. My CEO client was shocked at the ensuing cultural wars. Long-time employees reacted with anger and tears to the dictatorial regime of the new manager. The CEO found that he had no time to run his thriving but complex company. Instead, his days were spent trying to mediate disputes among the new manager, his team and other departments.

A third client reorganized its large HR department and brought in several new players to invigorate the team. Result? Another culture clash! The old team insisted that workers need HR representatives who are employee advocates. The new managers wanted to move up the ladder of corporate success. They were convinced the way to do that was to raise the visibility of HR and make HR representatives business partners with the leaders of their business units. When I came in to facilitate a session to resolve this dispute, some of the people were not even speaking to one another.

What is the common denominator in all of these situations? The leaders in these organizations had not spent enough time and energy thinking about culture—that invisible glue that holds organizations together and determines organizational effectiveness.

I’m amazed that even the most successful companies have spent so little time thinking about what kind of culture they want to create and what kind of employees will assist them in building that culture, as well as how to shape, deliver and reinforce that message. The executive team may have spent a few hours working on a superficial and platitudinous mission statement that they then proceeded to plaster on the walls of employee lunch rooms and insert into the employee manual, but the kind of culture I’m talking about will only come from two things: 1) top leaders walking the talk; and 2) constantly engaging employees in ongoing discussions about culture. When organizations take the time to do this kind of work, the culture they want to create becomes what Margaret Wheatley, in her book Leadership and the New Science, calls a “field of vision”—a powerful structuring field where certain types of individual behavior and events are guaranteed.

In order to shape the future, HR professionals need to encourage...
other leaders and serve as models to create energy fields that shape organizational culture. Wheatley sees leaders as “broadcasters, talk radio beacons of information, pulsing out messages everywhere...stating, clarifying, discussing, modeling, filling all of space with the messages we care about.”

Leading into the future will require even the best HR practitioners to acquire new skills. The old order in the workplaces is clearly crumbling, but the new has not yet emerged. In between, a great many misunderstandings occur.

The reality is that today’s new workforce trends call for new leadership attitudes. Organizations now face historic shortages of skilled employees to fill many positions, making it essential to retain productive employees and attract the best new employees. Worker loyalty is at an all-time low, with people changing jobs so frequently that leaders have no time to build cohesive teams. Those workers who are available are much more diverse and have a different work ethic, creating the need to manage differently. Increased employee litigation and conflict distract leaders from their mission. Setting aside the time to create, discuss and shape organizational culture is one part of the solution to these problems.

In order to avoid dinosaur status, HR practitioners must reclaim leadership on the issue of organization effectiveness from all of the total quality management experts, and must force ongoing conversations at every level about the power of culture in an organization.

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**Society for Human Resource Management Announces Awards**

The Society for Human Resource Management honored five HR professionals this year with its Award for Professional Excellence. Two winners were chosen in the “large organization” (more than 5,000 employees) category, one winner was selected for each of the “medium organization” (1,001–5,000 employees) and “small organization” (1,000 or fewer employees) categories and one winner was selected in the new category of HR education. Although the honorees come from different industries and from firms of varying size, they all share a common belief: There’s more opportunity and recognition for HR practitioners than ever before.

**Large Organization Winner:** Arte Nathan, Las Vegas Mirage Resorts

**Large Organization Winner:** Charles Nielsen, Texas Instruments

**Medium Organization Winner:** Susan Cabell, Martha Jefferson Health Services

**Small Organization Winner:** Dallas Salisbury, Employment Benefit Research Institute

**HR Education:** Edward Lawler, University of Southern California

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