

Raising HR's credibility

[A paper written by Hamish Davidson adapted from an address to the PPMA Annual Seminar, delivered on 19th April 2013]

HR has moved a long way over the last decade or two...or has it?

This paper is designed to be a challenging and thought provoking meander into the world of HR and its role in modern commerce. It will explore the perceptions of the HR profession, particularly within the public sector and local government, in terms of fact and fiction, and discuss how the profession can up its game to demonstrate its true worth.

At a time when we all have to demonstrate our cost benefit and maximise our professional worth, self-reflection is important for us all.

One might well ask why the need to address a topic around the HR profession's credibility. It sounds a bit defensive. And of course, it is.

The declining HR talent funnel and pool

For many years now, I have watched an increasing level of defensiveness and anxiety arising amongst the local government (and indeed, public sector) HR leaders and the broader HR community. It's a long and well-established trend.

An anxiety about the gradual decline in the HR talent pool coming through (which is of course why the 'rising stars' initiative is so important) – but it doesn't mask a growing talent vacuum. And this is a reason why it is so hard to appoint to senior HR roles. As each Socpo/PPMA President has taken their year of office (and I have known 'most' of them through the past 20 years), I have always taken the opportunity to test if I am being too gloomy – but no, in their non-public and 'off the record' comments, almost all have expressed their anxiety on this issue.

Of course, you are not alone, as a profession or discipline, in feeling this way. Cipfa has experienced a cataclysmic decline in their talent pool coming through for many years now. And as I have tried to explain to any who cared to listen, one of the 'main' reasons for this is that gone are the days when it was acceptable to have the old fashioned treasurer, a man ('cause it was usually a man) with a sign over the door saying 'whatever you want, the answers no'. These days, CX's and Leaders want corporate players, problem solvers, and solution providers. They want broad based, more commercially minded, finance professionals who don't say 'no', but say 'ok, I see where you are trying to get to – I don't think we can do it that way but let me see what other routes I can come up with'. And these days, the finance professional who pulls a bit of hidden money from this drawer and a bit of salted away money from that drawer, as in the old days – gets fired, not rewarded. No CX or Leader in our modern local government can run their organisation when they can't trust the finance professional to give them accurate numbers.

Of course, you'll note I didn't say that the Leader, elected Mayor or CX has to trust the finance professional – I said they have to trust the numbers. Actually, if you look behind the scenes of instances where the CX has fallen out with the members (or the Leader, or elected Mayor), in so many instances, you don't need to look too far to find the bloodied hand, Brutus style, of the finance man (and again, usually, in terms of turncoat behaviour, it's a man).

Mind you, before I really develop the theme and get too far into this, there is one health warning that my good mate, Shahidul Miah¹ was right to point out and thus it's only fair to raise.

This trend of an anxiety of the quality and depth of up and coming talent (or the talent funnel) is in fact nothing new, and is something we hear a lot of in every sector and in many professions... 'there is no talent coming through'... 'there are no rising stars' ... etc. I've talked about Finance and HR thus far, but it's also a common theme in FE and the lack of rising Principals. Headteachers are facing the same issue and I am sure there are many other sectors and professions saying the same thing. I get that the roles have changed dramatically over the last ten years and there hasn't been the succession planning or training and development required to meet these changes. However, as Shahidul suggests, isn't it possible that there is just a little bit of arrogance and snobbery from the old guard of professionals who always like to think they are 'the last of the good/competent/strong wave' in their profession? Presumably, the old guard had to adapt to the changes that took place in their profession during their tenure ... so why should we necessarily assume that the up and coming people will be unable to rise to the new challenges as well? Is it not possible that the old guard are actually part of the problem by not investing in their staff and not highlighting these issues at the appropriate time?

As recruiters, Shahidul and I have heard this moaning about lack of rising talent too many times in too many sectors ... and we can't help but feel that maybe, just maybe, it makes you feel better about yourselves and totally exonerates you from not having done anything about it. Maybe its time to stop whining about no proper succession planning and no rising stars ... cause actually, did deep enough and look hard enough, and they are often out there, and if you really are genuine and strong HR leaders and doing your job properly, shouldn't you know who they are and persuade the organisation to support and develop them. Maybe, for some of you, it's time to give the next generation a chance and stop doing them down because it makes you feel superior and the last of your breed.

Mind you – I guess it's a health warning to all of us. After all, hasn't each successive generation typically complained about the youth of the next generation as being lazy and no good?

Of course, this anxiety about up and coming talent in local government in particular is closely linked to a whole series of other trends.

The reduction in the size of the top management team

As CX's have come under pressure or felt obliged that the corporate centre should make its own contribution to savings, so we have seen some admittedly vast top management groups shrink in size to, in some cases, very small numbers. Even way

¹ Shahidul Miah, Managing Director, Bloomsbury Resourcing in conversation with the author

back when Bob Kerslake (now a 'Sir') was appointed CX of Sheffield, he deleted the top two tiers, and started again with just himself and four executive directors as the top tier – for a city of that size! Tony Redmond (also now a 'Sir', and former President of Cipfa) when he was CX of LB Harrow managed with just three Directors.

So legal came off the board – and has basically never recovered as a profession within local govt. Used to be it was the legal person that could expect to become CX. Not anymore – and it hasn't really been the case for some time

And HR came off the board.

You both got downgraded

The creation of Corporate Services directors or something similar

The creation of Corporate Services Director (or the equivalent) was one of the mechanisms that CX's and Leaders harnessed to restructure and create smaller boards. The problem was that instinctively, CX's and members were usually keen to gear this towards the finance person – and so it was rare (and still is, actually) for the HR person to land this role. And as I mentioned earlier, the legal people were now generally out of the game.

Reporting lines now not even to the CX

And with the creation of these Corporate Services posts, so HR began to find that it was now both off the board and no longer with a direct reporting line to the CX or direct access to senior members, especially with the demise of Personnel Committees. Oh, there was sometimes that notional 'dotted line' but that often withered away. And in some cases, HR might sometimes find itself in the CX's department – along perhaps with policy, comms and a few others.

But then, there were some other trends that hit.

The loss of skills in managing the political interface

This can be tracked back almost directly to the replacement of the Committee system with the Cabinet system. Previously, officers gained exposure to politicians by regularly attending the various committees. Officers (including HR) gained skills in managing this political interface (or didn't, and fell by the wayside).

Nowadays, under the Cabinet system, such exposure to politicians is rare until Assistant Director or Director level – and yet the 'assumption' that officers will naturally have these skills has not changed. As a result, some officers (including HR) have found themselves suddenly to be much exposed upon a promotion, sometimes out of their depth – and sometimes fatally out of their depth in terms of retaining their new role.

CX's began to broaden out the HR person spec

Just as the role of CX has broadened from managing a steady state to managing a rapidly evolving (and usually shrinking) organisation, with a larger focus on the need for different skills sets, more influencing and much more customer and public focus than ever before – so too the needs of the HR professional grew, with a massive shift away from a focus on process to one on culture, talent, skills and strategic advice. And guess what – the HR profession didn't adapt quickly enough. This body

(formerly Socpo and now called PPMA) didn't adapt quickly enough. Nor did legal and nor did Cipfa.

CX's struggled to get the HR senior level and strategic HR talent they needed – and in far too many cases, actually they still do. And so a lot of CX's got disheartened

CX's lost faith in HR

And so now arose the issue of CX's just losing faith in HR.

"It's lovely to talk about 'business partner' and 'seat at the table,' but the challenge for HR leaders is: Do they understand what's being served at that table?" says Marc Effron, president of the consulting firm The Talent Strategy Group and founder of the New Talent Management Network, a group of HR professionals started by Avon Products Inc's former vice president of global talent management.²

This gap may explain why CEOs rank talent as a top priority but don't mention the HR function

Technological advances will continue to transform the field. Organisations have "dramatically" more self-service tools available now than they did 10 years ago, says Susan Meisinger, a consultant who retired as President and CEO of the US Society of Human Resource Management in 2008. "... freeing up HR to focus on what it should be: getting in the right talent and making sure they're developed appropriately and looking at the strategy of the organisation – where is the organisation going and what are the talent needs?"³

And the killer statement from Susan Meisinger ...

"There are a lot of folks in HR who grew up in the transactional world who aren't equipped to operate in the strategic world."⁴

Late last year, I was talking to a former local government unitary CX about why the top HR position was now at an AD level, reporting through, argh, finance. And he said that having tried twice with an HR person on the board who failed totally to deliver, he and his Directors had given up. HR had been downgraded, and as long as he was CX, that decision would not be reviewed.

I talked last year to another unitary CX about her decision to cull the size of her direct reports, and allocate HR to report in through the finance function. Argh, again.

Truth is, in too many organisations, HR just seems to have lost the oomph, impact, seniority, support – and yes, credibility, that it needs.

The very best of HR talent has typically moved on and out

² Is HR at Its Breaking Point? By Todd Hennemen Published April 5, 2013, Workforce.com

³ Is HR at Its Breaking Point? By Todd Hennemen Published April 5, 2013, Workforce.com

⁴ Is HR at Its Breaking Point? By Todd Hennemen Published April 5, 2013

Perhaps it's inevitable, and maybe not a bad thing – but there is a distinct trend of many of the best and most ambitious of HR people to read the signs, not wait to be 'done unto' or downgraded, and just get out of HR.

Look at some of your former Presidents – Gillian Hibberd at Bucks; Stephen Moir, first moving to a deputy CX in the health service and harnessing that experience to land the role of Director of HR for NHS England (you'll note that the NHS has tended to keep HR on their boards so the 'status' issue has been less of a worry, even if the 'calibre' issue remains); even the late Susan Thomas went on to become a DG Corporate Services in the civil service. Angela O'Connor too left local government for board HR roles at the Crown Prosecution Service and the National Police Improvement Agency before setting up her own business. And look at other irreplaceable talent such as Dennis Roberts, who having led HR at a whole series of London Boroughs in permanent and interim roles, moved on and out to similar roles for government agencies.

I think what I am saying is that whereas one can get to a CX role from being Director of Housing or Director of Adult or Children's Services i.e. from a big budget/spending department, generally, you can't from a role that is perceived of as being lesser in scope and not on the top board, and that the only way to do so is to try and grab one of those few remaining broader roles and leave HR behind.

Yes, there are exceptions. Colin Carmichael former Director of HR at LB Camden managed to snag himself the CX of Canterbury post where he remains to this day – but that was some years ago. And yes – former PPMA President Anne Gibson is now Managing Director (Acting) – and you'll note that the 'acting' comes after the Managing Director title rather than before, at Norfolk County Council, but that is a testament, I think, to the trust and especially close working relationship she built up with her members during a particularly challenging previous 12 months, never mind her personal skills and talent. And Susan Martin, on PPMA's board and now Deputy Chief Executive (and recently, Acting Chief Executive) at the London Pension Fund Authority – but frankly, on the strength of a varied career across a range of sectors.

I think that this is a case where the exceptions prove an emerging rule.

So these, then, are some of the broader, historical trends that the HR profession in local government has witnessed. Nothing, I think, too grossly controversial here.

But there are some other trends, and you may find some of these to be a bit more controversial and difficult to swallow. But then Richard Crouch, your current President, when briefing me in advance of giving my address to the PPMA Seminar instructed me to do precisely that – "tell it like it is and be controversial". And when I asked Anne Gibson what she thought, she just laughed and said "Well, not being you will never work, and we're all braced for it, so just tell us". So here we go.

Complacency

At the risk of being perceived to be rude to PPMA, I think that the organisation has, over the years, been too complacent – just as the profession in general has been. There's been a tad too much focus on compliance-related HR, on transaction-related HR and latterly on feeling a victim and as a result being overly defensive.

Maybe its understandable when the whole sector feels as if its going through eternal turmoil that when you get together, you try to be as positive as possible, and as upbeat as possible. After all, who wants to be President of a profession or

organisation in terminal decline. But surely I wasn't the only one who found it all a bit gut-wrenching when at a Solace dinner a couple of years back, the then President found it appropriate to call upon all those attending to 'Let's give ourselves a round of applause for 'all' doing a really good job'. There's complacency in action.

It was early 2009 when Steve Bundred, the CX of the Audit Commission publicly warned about an 'Armageddon scenario' and that ...

*"... any managers of a public service who are not planning now on the basis that they will have substantially less money to spend in two years time are living in cloud-cuckoo-land."*⁵

And yet suddenly, as if it was all a great surprise, there have been more calls of 'Armageddon' in recent weeks, as if Steve had never sounded the alarm more than four years ago

Twelve years ago, I was invited to speak to the Association of County Secretaries and Solicitors (ACSeS) conference and urged to "Tell 'em like it is, Hamish, 'cause they are in total denial and just don't get it". So, I did. I explained why lawyers were no longer being appointed CX, how they had lost and were losing influence, were at risk of being almost wholly outsourced and very few could look to attaining high level positions in local government. That said, I gave them a plan, a '10 year pathway' if you like (to use NHS jargon), whereby they might be able to recover their lost influence. I don't know – maybe in part it's because of an increased focus in operational delivery and a total loss of strategic focus following that metaphorical 'bucket of cold water' I drenched them with, but it took another four years to summon the courage to invite me back, at the urging of another anxious President, who also insisted I tell it like it is. Sadly, my analysis was that on every single major potential initiative that I had suggested, barely any progress had been made – and thus they were doomed.

Now, the good news is that I don't think that the HR profession is in 'quite' such a dire position. But an uncomfortable number of the debates I have attended, articles that I have read, and the views I have heard expressed smack of narrow agendas, defensiveness, defeatism, short-termism versus strategic, process at the expense of outcomes, a far higher degree of comfort with operational rather than strategic, carping ... and yes, sometimes even complacency or missing the agenda.

I guess some of this is understandable. Pressures are huge; the human and emotional costs and impact of making cutbacks are draining, even debilitating; and with no end in sight and the prognosis being much, much more of the same and more likely, worse – it must indeed be very hard to look above the immediate.

But that is your job. And that is your challenge – if you want to be credible in the eyes of those who are equally at a loss as to what to do, and are basically scared.

Let someone else do it – I am retiring soon

And what is not forgivable, in my eyes, are those individuals, paid a lot of money, who decide: 'not' to make decisions; 'not' to address what needs to be done in re-shaping services or organisations to fit current and anticipated needs; and to kick

⁵ <http://centurean2.wordpress.com/2009/02/27/god-help-the-public-after-the-next-election-armageddon-levels-of-public-debt/>

critical decisions into the long grass for someone else to deal with. Yeah – that’s really serving the community. There’s your ‘public ethos’ in action.

Whether politicians reluctant to make tough decisions because of the electoral cycle, or officers, most especially CX’s and Finance Directors who have no desire to ‘rock their boat’ by forcing the issue and having run the numbers (and let me assure you, I know of no local government CX or Finance Director who has not run the numbers re their pension), just want to see out another 12 months and leave the tough decisions to some one else.

And there is no point your denying to me that this has happened, is happening and happens still. It took a very brave Head of HR at Sheffield post the World Student Games in 1997 when the city was effectively bankrupt, to insist to members on the use of external consultants to recruit a new Chief Executive (which brought Bob Kerslake into the role). That Head of HR summed up the total abdication of their roles by officers (including himself) in addressing the budget problem as being effectively to ‘put an elastic band round the papers and hand them to members’. He wasn’t proud of his contribution as an officer, but he was determined (retiring with a terminal illness as he was) that his last actions as an officer would be honourable and in the absolute best interests of the authority.

Shoddy standards and behaviours – when HR is meant to role model values and behaviours

My late friend, Susan Thomas and a former President would not, when Director of HR at LB Lewisham, have stood for some of the appalling behaviours and standards that I have witnessed, as a supplier to local government. Oh, she’d have defended her staff and apologised to me – but behind closed doors, she’d have had some very tough conversations with colleagues. And for those of you who recall her, Susan could be extremely tough.

Many years ago, Angela O’Connor, another of your past Presidents, when Head of HR at LB Hackney had a conference for all Hackney HR practitioners. Both Susan and I were invited guest speakers – again urged to ‘tell it like it was’. And Susan’s (who used to work at Hackney many years previously) opening line was – ‘What have you done to my organisation?’ She was mortified at the poor standards and behaviours – all of which Angela had inherited, was not ashamed to hide, and was striving to address.

Susan would not have tolerated one of her HR team: setting utterly unrealistic goals for the submission of CV’s for a particular role on the basis of extreme urgency; refusing to take calls to discuss the role; and taking three months to finally come back after chasing repeatedly to say that none of the CV’s were appropriate and it was the policy of the authority not to give feedback. But this happened with another local authority earlier this year.

Susan would not have tolerated one of her HR team requiring CV’s for a role within three days because of the urgency, then taking four weeks to get back and say she (it was a she) wanted to see three of them – and being most put out that two of them had taken other jobs in the meantime, and refusing to budge on an interview slot where the remaining candidate requested a different day so as not to have to take a day off work because of the need to travel to the Midlands and back, and refusing to pay any travel costs. But this happened earlier this year.

Let me tell you – or rather, let the publication US Workforce Trends tell you ...

“The skills shortage has clear implications for your departments; your time to fill will increase; your luxury of taking weeks or even months to hire will evaporate; ‘you snooze, you lose’, so you will be forced to make sure you streamline your hiring process to get the best possible candidates.”⁶

And what a fabulous and brave piece from your President, Richard Crouch in an MJ supplement, calling for a bit more humanity and re-discovering the human side in your role. After all, the first word in HR is human (not that you would know it from the jobs-worth’s that occupy some of the deepest recesses of your departments).

And where, might I ask is the ‘humanity’ that deems it acceptable to have staff suspended on full pay for months on end, and even more than a year whilst some ‘Spanish inquisition’ style investigation goes on and on and on. You may think that the private sector is more ruthless than the public sector in getting rid of people, but it is certainly less cruel and more clinical than the public sector, which too often degrades employees, cuts them off from former colleagues and destroys their self-confidence as one month rolls into another with no sign of a resolution. I have often thought that what a fascinating (and, as a taxpayer, horrifying) set of numbers would arise if FOI requests to all public service bodies were made requesting: how many employees were currently suspended on full pay; and for how long. And then, let’s see that particular league table of shame.

Staff watch, listen and observe how their colleagues are treated. They watch the trials that HR put people through. They are not stupid. But all too often, they are cowed into saying nothing.

Bravery

That takes me naturally onto another topic. Where is the bravery in HR these days? I gave you an example earlier of that former Head of HR in Sheffield.

Where is the bravery to take on the ‘Forces of Darkness and Evil’ and the ‘Legions of the Damned’ otherwise known as ‘Procurement’?

Why, for the recruitment of one, albeit senior post, did the length of my submission earlier this year, excluding all their bumph but simply answering all that a procurement-run process asked for, why did it have to run to a total of 107 pages? Why did we have to submit details on 11 different policies – utterly unconnected with recruitment? Why, in the internet era were we required to physically deliver two typed copies plus a version on CD by ‘one minute to the witching hour’?

Truly, is it any wonder that public sector processes have a bad name? This is utterly out of all proportion to the task at hand.

Where is the Head of HR (even the CX) who, to quote the nun in Dan Brown’s ‘The Da Vinci Code’, who is seeking to stop Silas discovering ‘the rose’, is prepared to say to these idiots “This far and no further”, rather go along with and be associated with this nonsense.

⁶ Is HR at Its Breaking Point? By Todd Hennemen Published April 5, 2013, Workforce.com

You may think these are silly examples, but its symptomatic of how daft, process driven, one size fits all procurement (usually reporting through finance – what a surprise) is doing enormous and lasting damage.

A second example of bravery is standing up to the Freedom of Information stuff and local/national press attacks against staff development initiatives, staff away day's, leadership development, coaching and investing in your people. And by 'standing up', I mean accepting the challenge, having no problem with transparency, and that if you believe in what you are doing, you press on and take the brickbats. You should never be undertaking initiatives that you don't believe in, that you can't defend, and that you don't believe are right.

A third example of bravery that I'd like to see more of is in challenging the most ridiculous recruitment process ever constructed anywhere on the planet. It's known as the 'Panel interview'.

The trouble with Panels

There used to be a day, when I was young and naïve (long, long ago) – when I believed in the power of ownership, buy-in and consensus that panels brought to an interview process. I believed (and to a limited extent, still do) in the notion of accountability and democratic process. A group of people, testing and challenging candidates – and coming to a common view about which one they most prefer.

Yeah, right.

More likely 'least dislike'! Oh, the horror of the bad old days. Giant panels. Candidates brought into the room as if being put on trial. A lone exposed seat (no table or desk) in the midst of a horseshoe setting like Harry Potter facing charges of 'performing under-age witchcraft in the presence of a Muggle'. Sometimes one person in the midst of 70 plus councilors in the council chamber (no joke – this has happened twice for me)! Colleagues still tell me about CX candidates having to appear before an entire council, and Chief Constable candidates having to appear before an entire Police Authority. No water. No introductions. Equal opps rules, OK! A sea of glowering faces (to smile at one candidate is to potentially advantage that candidate over others). Set and formulaic questions. No follow ups. Asked at the end of the interview if you "are a serious candidate and would accept the role if offered" – and woe betide you if respond (because this still happens) with anything other than an enthusiastic 'absolutely'. And to dare to have any questions for the Panel other than the trivial? References (all done by letter) only opened after all interviews completed. Required to hang around all day with the other candidates until the panel has made up its mind. Preferred candidate hauled back into the 'pit' to be offered the job and 'required' to accept – no time to reflect to negotiate. Rest of the candidates then told that they may now go home. Feedback? Hah! That you should be so lucky. And if you got any at all, "It was close". As our American cousins have a habit of saying ... BS.

Then it got a bit better. Members discovered that it wasn't actually 'illegal' to ask different and additional questions (which is what the Dementors, aka equal opps Stasi masquerading as 'Personnel', had brainwashed panels into thinking) – although some progressive members never did conform of course, and were forever being reported by officers for 'inappropriate behavior' and daring to re-phrase a question, or worse, having the temerity to ask one that was not on the list, and then being required to undergo re-training (ie. brainwashing and equal opps indoctrination) until one admitted the error of one's ways and was allowed back into the interview

chamber – but knowing, all the time, that you were being closely monitored, with any infraction likely to put you back in the ‘sin-bin’ (anyone old enough to recall the TV series, ‘The Prisoner’)? And where, may I ask was the HR profession in all this? I’ll tell you – they were part of the problem.

The ‘bullying, intimidatory’ nature of the exposed seat in the bear pit is, for the most part, history. The panels have gotten smaller. And rarely, except in the most backward of authorities (and sadly, there still are a few), are all the shortlist candidates made to hang around all day until members have made up their mind. So all is well, isn’t it?

Well, perhaps not.

You see, there is one huge basic flaw with panels that we all know – but don’t discuss. And I am not talking about the occasional ghastly practice of the decision splitting down party lines. And neither am I talking about the habit of ‘testing candidates to death’ with a battery of psychometric and other ‘magic spells’ such as media exercises, mock-cabinet meetings, meetings with stakeholders and officers, presentations, trials by chicken legs or sausage rolls, and dinners – all of which have their merits, but the outputs from which are all too commonly not properly connected into the deliberations of the panel.

No, the real and unspoken problems with Panels are: not being clear and not having any consensus as to what they are looking for before the process starts; the common tendency to appoint to lowest common denominator; the tendency to be ‘conservative’ (note – small ‘c’); and the tendency to be risk-averse. So, the more risky, adventurous, different (and especially non-local government or non-public sector) candidates ‘tend’ not to get appointed. Panels ‘tend’ to play ‘safe’. And when ‘safe and less-change focused’ candidates get appointed – do they then go on and tend to appoint risky, edgy subordinates who might threaten them? No – quite the reverse. So what we have is a very gradual ‘dumbing- down’ of talent in the sector. The up and coming, edgy talent from within (many of them non-white and/or women with rather different career tracks) see all these glass ceilings and guess what? Increasingly, they are voting with their feet and getting out to another place where they know their pace, passion and energy will be better appreciated. And the talent from outside of the sector that dips their toe in the water by applying for a few roles within local government or elsewhere within the public sector? Well, they swiftly see the error of their ways, and that the rhetoric of the ad is undermined by the narrowness of the specs and the caution of the panels - and so, all too often, they give up.

Panels. Whether member, officer (or even, recruiter), each of you will have your own particular horror story. I have sufficient for a book (and you know who you are) that is part-drafted and locked away - for the moment.

Truthfully, panels are actually part of the talent problem. Trouble is, I haven’t yet thought of the solution, though I am working on it. Yes – good panels can sometimes work if they are well prepared and well advised, but truthfully, the general rule is that they don’t really work that well. You know it, and it know it. I’m open to suggestions as to alternatives.

Actually, of course, where I would really like to see your bravery exhibited more, is in challenging behaviours anywhere you find them that run counter to the espoused values and attitudes desired of your organisation – which of course, starts at the top with members but also with the CX and the top management group.

So called 'management teams'

Sadly, another sore point with me, which is a responsibility that really ought to rest with HR, is that most so-called teams aren't teams at all – rather, they are 'groups'. A team suggests common and shared goals/values, and a control of individual egos. How many of you can truly say that the top management in your organisations are actually functional teams rather than dysfunctional groups?

Of course, it is not always HR's fault that this has arisen. Many a Leader, CX, Chief Officer or Cabinet member is in fact a person who rules by fear, and relishes the strategy of divide and conquer. Or has an ego that defies physical measurement.

Transformation

I have another anxiety, where the HR profession has, I feel, gone a bit off the rails of late – which is around job titles. Remember when equalities was all the rage, and we had to tick that box and somebody was given the title of equalities guru?

And do you remember how that got discredited – because really, we were 'all' meant to 'get' and 'do' both equalities and diversity. It should in fact be inherent in everyone's job description.

And then 'change' was all in vogue – so we had change agents, change managers and change champions.

I guess you'll see where we are headed – 'cause now we have 'Transformation'. 'Transformation' this and 'transformation' that. In fact, the term has become so widely used – and as a result discredited, that Stephen Hughes, CX of Birmingham last year felt obliged to say that what was now needed was 'total transformation', whatever that is.⁷

I worry that we are back to the equalities thing – we give someone that job title and we've ticked that box. Hurrah for the CX – another item sorted that he/she can tell the Leader has been fixed. Another step closer to your end of year performance payment.

Now I am prepared to believe that Gillian Hibberd at Bucks CC really does do transformation – her job title says she does, and radical and novel things do seem to be happening at Bucks CC, but honestly, you all know that this is not the case everywhere. I have interviewed many folk with 'transformation' in their job title, and more often than not failed to see a single transforming thought or bone in their body. And I am sure you have too.

Bottom line – recruiters like me have learned to be very wary when interviewing people with transformation in their job title. Sometimes it feels a bit too much like that old standby – Special Projects Director, when you had someone you didn't know what to do with. My advice? Just stop using the term 'transformation' – because its become discredited.

Wouldn't it be better to accept that what we have to do is 'mainstream' innovation, creativity, and transformation – and not make it one person's responsibility?

⁷ <http://www.lgcplus.com/briefings/cuts-call-for-total-transformation/5051660.article>

Shouldn't HR be saying – 'no, hang on a minute' – when the next re-organisation comes along, and we add the transformation title to yet another slew of staff? Surely 'transformation', innovation' and 'creativity' needs to be in the DNA of everyone, individually and institutionally? Surely what we want to achieve is empowered staff, innovating and responding to users and citizens?

The looming big turnover of staff exposing your lack of focus on real and effective succession planning

Some point soon, you're going to have a much-increased turnover of staff – and you're likely going to lose a lot of the very people you least want to lose.

Now you might well say to me 'so what, we will need to shed staff anyhow'. Yes – I accept that, but you know and I know that: all organisations have a natural 'churn' rate; that this churn rate has been artificially suppressed of late; that whether it is or isn't, people reach a point where they think the grass is greener on the other side, and folk will move; and those who find it easiest to move will be your best people and your best talent – all too often, those you can least afford to lose.

Even in this current austerity environment, talent management and development is vital. As a recruiter/headhunter, I remain astonished at the relative lack of succession planning and plausible internal candidates for many roles we are asked to bid for. This is a situation that FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 companies just wouldn't tolerate, and for which the top HR person would be fired.

I will return to this issue.

So I have painted a historical context for you – and I have then sought to look at just a few of the other contextual issues that are impacting on HR. There are many other issues I could have raised and that you may rightly feel that I should have included. So be it.

By the way, none of this is to say that there are not exemplars of fine practice around – for at events such as the PPMA seminar, you rightly share, celebrate and talk about them. And there is some fine rising star talent, some of which you rightly showcase at your events – but there is not enough, and without further investment and nurturing, it will not develop as it should and you will lose it. Just as, across local government and the public sector generally, you have lost so many of your graduate trainees.

THE FUTURE

So let me turn to the future. Let's consider a game plan for the HR profession, much as I was asked to do all those years ago for the legal profession. How to turn those Leaders, CX's and chief officers who have lost faith in HR around. How to demonstrate your worth and potential. Your value. Your ... credibility.

In no particular order, let me pick up a number of themes where I would be focusing were I to find myself in your shoes.

Diversity and all its implications

Diverse teams tend to make more informed decisions; talent comes in all shapes, sizes, guises, ages, whatever. And the best of talent in any one sector tends to be as good as the best of talent in any other sector. I truly believe this.

And diversity also means diverse in: thinking and approach; new ideas; different perspectives; and injecting different experiences into your organisation.

Prejudice has no place in your recruitment. The trouble is that diversity sometimes looks, feels and sounds different. And talent is sometimes obscured beneath these differences. And apart from the obvious colour and gender differences: sometimes it's accent; sometimes it's dress; sometimes it's ability/disability; and sometimes something less obvious.

There are two profound implications:

How you recruit for difference

You have to challenge and change your processes; challenge and change your specs; worry less about competencies (oh, please, I beg of you, worry less about competencies) and worry more about values and attitudes and behaviours; and above all, worry how you are going to get panels to make braver decisions and veer away from the safer, lower risk, conservative option.

And just to be clear, recruiters are as often part of the problem here, rather than part of the solution. Too many recruiters 'love' a tight narrow brief that so over-defines the spec that only a few people in the country can possibly perform the role – 'cause it makes the search that much easier. And in an era of cost-cutting and when you are driving down fees, don't you realise that recruiters must similarly respond by working out how to cut down on the amount of work? Over-defined specs means that much narrower a pool of potential candidates to fill the role, and that much less work to seek them out. Don't you wonder sometimes why so many recruiters don't challenge your brief? Because it's convenient! I repeat – overly narrow specs driven by HR and not challenged by consultants stifle the possibility of delivering on diversity. And for a profession that 'claims' to get it, actually, I don't think you do. Not really.

How you 'transition', develop and retain that talent

Let me tell you about the civil service and then let me draw some comparisons with the FTSE 50 and the Fortune 100, and then finally with your sector.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that some 20-25% of senior civil service (SCS) appointments over the last five years have been made from outside of the civil service.

Now, whilst both the current and previous Governments are/were publicly intent on changing the culture of the civil service, and have seen bringing in folk from outside of the sector to be an essential part of achieving that outcome, I am here to tell you that any major private sector international firm that found it was having to make 25% of its senior appointments from not only outside of the organisation but outside of the immediate sector would likely fire its Head of HR. This is quite apart from the inevitable and recurring loss of corporate knowledge that would ensue from such a continued pattern of appointments.

This is not to say that FTSE 100 and Fortune 500 firms don't make external appointments at senior levels from time to time. They do – but:

- First, they are rare

- Second, there will invariably have been some potentially credible internal candidates that were also considered
- Third and most crucially of all, if an external appointment is made and most specifically, if it is from someone from outside of that organisation's immediate sector (eg. appointing an engineering specialist to a fast foods-consumer group), then the appointing organisation will invest in that person and do everything that they can to ensure that this external appointment is a success. In other words, someone 'owns' that appointment and the need for it to be successful. And I am not specifically talking about the top job here – I am just talking about a senior role.

So, what happens in the civil service currently? Nobody 'owns' the success of these external appointments. It is in nobody's job spec or performance criteria. And two years after having been appointed, how many of these external appointments have survived? But I think a more relevant question, perhaps is, what efforts were made to enable them to survive?

As ever, folk think 'job done' when the hire is made, whereas in fact the job is just starting. Who typically, if at all, gets feedback at the end of the appointment process? Those that did not get appointed. Who typically does not get feedback? The person that did get appointed. Were there any concerns or potential gaps in the person that did get appointed? Of course there were. And what typically then happens? Nothing. And if that person is appointed from outside of the organisation, or it's a radical promotion – are we not used to the antibodies in the organisation rallying round and trying to expel the invader? Of course we are.

And so it is with the civil service. Who owns these brave (you may choose to say foolhardy) external appointments? Whose job is it to enable these appointees to be successful? Who sees it as their role to ensure that on appointment (and before having started), honest feedback about any skills and knowledge gaps is provided; that a discussion takes place between the appointee and their line manager about such; that the proper coaching and mentoring support is put in place; that they are introduced to peer-support networks; that regular independent reviews are scheduled; and that everything is done to ensure that critical but risky investment in external talent succeeds and deliver for themselves and the organisation?

Who owns all of this? Nobody. Within the civil service currently, I'd say that little if anything of this is done – and where it is, it is not on a consistent and coherent basis.

Of course, the next question is to ask if you are that much better?

I strongly believe that one of the key 'capacities' that you should be looking for if promoting from within, or hiring from outside is 'ability and self-awareness to make the transition'. I have watched too many internals promoted either too early or not given enough support in their new role, only to crash and burn. And I have seen too many external appointees, particularly from outside of the sector and most especially from private sector, struggle due to a lack of self-awareness in how they need to deploy their talents 'differently' in a new context or setting, and a lack of appreciation from their new employer about the critical importance of assessing this capacity when interviewing, and then failing to provide any practical support in making the transition. The latter is absolutely unforgiveable – and irresponsible.

Talent management is a core board and top people person responsibility

Let me tell you how it works in the private sector, at the Fortune 500 and FTSE 100 level of companies.

25% of the time of the top people person (and by the way, they are usually on the exec board) is spent managing and looking after the careers and career development of the top cadre of their global talent. Not a month will go by but that cadre is not contacted by HR and not a quarter will go by but that cadre is not seen or spoken to, re the development of their career – planning their move to different roles that will seek to position them better for succession planning across the organisation. And the ‘top talent’ development plans will be reviewed by the organisation’s non-exec ‘Nominations Committee. Tell me – how many of you spend a quarter of your time on the development of your top and future talent?

But don’t be too shocked – you’ll be very hard pressed to find any Head of HR across the public and not for profit sectors that does.

A major part of your role should be around managing the development and effectiveness of the top group/team and looking at the top cadre across the organisation and thinking all the time about succession planning and developing staff. If you were a private sector business, this would be considered a crucial governance matter – and your non-execs would be holding you and the CX to account for such. You need to get yourself into that mindset.

However, the issue of talent and succession planning goes still further.

If I had been preparing an academic based paper (which this is not), then I would naturally have turned to something like the March/April 2013 overview of the future of HR by Accenture.⁸

In essence, the core message of this report is that to compete in the future, organisations will need to push talent management beyond the confines of the enterprise wall to include the new extended workforce - a network of outside contractors, outsourcing partners, vendors, strategic partners and other non-traditional workers. Their proposition is that by maximising the potential of both an extended workforce and permanent employees, your organisation can gain critical advantages – including agility and access to valuable talent.

This is what they term ‘the end of work as we know it’, where in the future, an organisation’s competitiveness will hinge on a highly unlikely factor – workers who aren’t employees at all. You will therefore be drawing on a growing number of people who temporarily lend you their skills and knowledge in an ever-expanding network of freelancers, consultants, outsourcing partners, vendors and other types of non-traditional talent.

It is in this way, they state, that you will achieve the holy grail of:

- agility in the face of a highly turbulent business environment, and
- access to high-performing, highly skilled talent

This means, they say, that HR needs to redefine its mission and activities and, perhaps create new roles and organisational structures to maximise the extended workforce’s strategic value, and you do this by, for example:

⁸ <http://www.accenture.com/us-en/Pages/insight-future-of-hr.aspx>

- Re-defining HR's customers – traditionally they have been employees. Now, they should also include members of the extended workforce; and partner organisations – but ultimately, it's the public!
- Integrate processes and systems – you need to develop a unified strategy and set of processes and information systems that span all talent segments
- Create new organisational structures or roles that cross boundaries and disciplines – everyone from procurement to finance, legal to line managers could conceivably take responsibility for the extended workforce
- Use analytics to become an expert advisor on the talent landscape – deciding when to use which talent pools, for which tasks, today and in the future will become an increasingly critical HR capability
- Become a talent broker – HR practitioners will need to become talent brokers, facilitating matches between specific workers (extended or permanent) and specific tasks or team
- Identify future people and skills needs
- Forge new relationships with partner organisations – accomplishing work through a network of organisations
- Apply talent management practices to the extended workforce – re-thinking talent management practices and determining how each practice can be extended to include workers other than employees in order to best maximise their potential
- Place-based talent management – working with colleges and schools and other employers
- Segment the extended workforce – tailoring your people practices to meet the needs of a highly diverse employee base⁹

So that's the informed view of where we are headed. Let me try and apply some of that to your context

If Bob Kerslake had been speaking to the PPMA Seminar that I attended back in April, I am confident that one message he would have conveyed (other than his version of the 'graph of doom') would have been:

- There's no more money coming from the centre
- You need as local authorities to do everything you can to boost your local tax base which means the private sector
- You need to encourage local enterprise
- You need to boost employment – which means local jobs and which means doing everything you can to facilitate the creation of new businesses and encouraging entrepreneurship.

⁹ Accenture, March/April 2013, Review of HR trends

I know he would have made these points, because he includes them at some point in virtually every public speech that he makes nowadays to a local government audience (and I have heard three of them in the last twelve months).

There are a whole series of implications from this message

Place Making/Place Shaping

First is the criticality of 'place shaping' or 'place making' as it is better known in the US. I'm not really fussed that the current government found it necessary to ditch the term and find something new to call it like community engagement or community budgets, or whatever. But the bottom line is that it's to do with 'place'.

It is necessary to start thinking about the whole locality/community/place; about all sectors; about the entire local economy, workforce and talent pools. Whether your political masters, your CX and colleagues are doing this or are into this or not – this is where 'you' are going to have to go.

This is absolutely where the US is headed – where municipalities and local government are facing an even more dire scenario than in the UK. The power of place is what they call it – the emotional bonds that link people to a place.

Apart, the various components of a place or locality will never function as effectively or deliver as effectively as they can together.

HR, the people side of this process and drive, is a crucial component of making place shaping and place making happen. If I wanted to boost the credibility of HR, I would be getting out there and making connections. I would get way ahead of the game.

Collaboration

It follows, not surprisingly, that the second implication of Bob's plea about upping your game locally and my comments on place making is that 'collaboration' is the name of the game.

This is the current buzzword – but what does it really mean, and what makes for good collaboration and poor collaboration?

Well, curtailing egos and posturing is certainly one component, and the right kind of behaviours is another. And whether that collaboration is with another department, another authority, another sector or whatever – it's all geared to achieving together the outcomes that are increasingly impossible to achieve on your own.

And as an aside, I think that this applies to PPMA as well. I have no idea of the politics or the detail, but I remain astonished that you have not yet merged with HPMA – to boost your influence and combine your relative strengths. I so very much hope that, as with most potential mergers, it is not personal egos (on either side) that have blocked such a move.

And in an era of the internet and video link conference calls, and at a time when we keep hearing of the need for world class this and world class that, it can surely not be beyond the wit of PPMA to consider non-execs from overseas organisations on your governing body – as well as a shadow board of young people/rising stars, just starting out on their HR career.

And if your political masters are not natural collaborators, or if your god-like CX is the type who expects the world to come knocking at their door, and if your colleagues are like a batch of hissing cats when working with others – it doesn't mean that you have to be. You can choose to take the lead. You can choose to play a longer game. You can choose to be brave. As your President, Richard Crouch says, you can choose to be human.

Practicing and modeling excellent behaviours re outsourcing, commissioning, procurement, TUPE, and in all your dealings with related contracted bodies

And if you are going to have to work more closely with all sectors of your local community, and if you are going to think laterally when it comes to growing skills in your local 'place', then surely it is incumbent on you to demonstrate and promulgate to your local 'place' best practice with regard to behaviours around employment practice and skills development, and to seek to ensure that the top level skills and talents needed around commissioning, procurement and contracting are available to your organisation, whether on a permanent or interim/consulting basis.

Knowledge, skills and talent development

With a smaller permanent workforce and an increase in the transient workforce, it is going to be vital to capture knowledge and skills. It is going to be vital to develop the smaller pool of high skilled talent that you have permanently on your books. Turnover and churn should be happening because it is healthy – not because you are failing to invest in your precious talent. You should be moving on the staff you want to move on, because of effective and constructive performance management (and not trapping them in eternal, 'Groundhog Day' investigations) – rather than losing the staff you can't afford to lose because of pathetic or zero performance management.

Coaching and mentoring of staff (and yourself) is going to be vital as you re-skill and re-tool for a very differently shaped model of public services of the future.

And much of that coaching, mentoring and networking needs to be 'out-with' as well as within your sector. You need to get great ideas from wherever you can.

And that means you will need to be brave as you take irrational hits for 'wasting money' on staff development and coaching and networking events. I would take Eric Pickles at his word – 'be bold, independent and get on with it'¹⁰, knowing all the time that you'll get slated from time to time. Whether its Margaret Hodge or your local media haranguing you for your use of interims, just because they are still living in a netherworld when you could afford to permanently retain all the talent you ever needed, I don't care. She's right to challenge 'abuse' but wrong on the concept of the use of interims, and you are right. You know that the world has changed and if you know it is the right thing to do, and you know it will show through in improved performance – then get on with it.

And just to be clear, this applies as much to elected members as it does to staff. For example, why complain if you are unhappy with member's behavior at panels if you have not put them through some kind of training? Another example – why be uneasy about member's lack of appreciation around commissioning if you have not helped them to be better informed?

¹⁰ Guardian Professional, Tuesday 26 February, 2013; interview with Eric Pickles, Communities Secretary

Talent is primarily about staff, but it's also about your elected members as well.

Youth/young people

There is something too around what are we doing for our young people – that wasted generation causing a double whammy on the economy – with 25% at least not working and therefore not contributing, and thus also 'taking' too. Economically, this is absolutely unsustainable. And the human cost of this is ghastly.

I repeat - this is not sustainable. You are in a position, collaborating with local employers, to build the local skills of the future that you are going to need in your organisation and they in theirs. This is about your locality and the local economy. This is about employability skills – and its also about encouraging entrepreneurship, for even if we made all young people fully employable, the truth is there are not enough jobs for them all – so we need to do something around increasing their confidence and self-belief to have the courage to create enterprises for themselves.

You are HR. You 'get' skills'. Or at least, you are meant to. You are in a crucial position to influence within your localities. You have to get out there and do it. You have to become more visible in these actions – across the council and across all sectors of your community.

The digital world

And all this links closely into the digital world as well. Adapting to that world and the increasing proportion of the world that communicates in that manner. This does not mean cutting out access for those less confident, but it does mean moving and adapting – your processes and your own styles and behaviours. It may not mean having public lives such as Stephen Moir on LinkedIn, or Gillian Hibberd on Facebook – but it will, for some of you, mean entering the danger zone and being brave about learning new skills

Bravery

I have used the term 'bravery' quite a lot – and I do think you need to be courageous, bold and above all 'brave'. You can see many of the challenges that you face as you head into an even greater period of change than you have gone through over the last 4 years. Only the organisations that truly look way ahead, beyond 'efficiencies', are going to survive intact. In the US, cities are going bankrupt, Stockton in California being but the latest, though Detroit being the biggest example. Don't think that it's impossible here. It isn't.

I truly believe that the HR community has a powerful role in addressing future-shaping of services, organisations and skills. But it sometimes needs bravery to stand up and be counted and to demand a voice for your ideas – and to earn credibility.

The skills of managing at the political interface

As my good friend, Dennis Roberts (surely one of the wisest of former local government HR officers) quite rightly reminded me when I was discussing this paper with him, it would be easy to contest the scope of local government officers to be brave in a highly charged (political) environment, which is notably different from other

public bodies. So, surely a potentially missing (or underdeveloped) skill for local government officers is managing the political interface. As Dennis observed, this is often far more like the Ambassadors to foreign lands, having to promote (or protect) their organisation's interests and policies in different cultures with different (and often rapidly changing) priorities and alliances.

Missing this point is potentially fatal. Who in your organisation is taking on this responsibility for teaching and developing these skills, which as I pointed out earlier, are no longer honed early on in your career? Surely skills and talent development sits with HR? And who is teaching HR these skills so you can teach others?

Behaviours

And finally we come to modeling and displaying and living the values, behaviours and attitudes that supposedly you espouse. At every level, even the smallest behavior matters. A policy of not giving feedback – whether actual or just sheer institutionalised laziness. Dishonest or process-driven appraisals. The courage to be honest. The courage to be authentic. If HR can't be human, then who can?

And a minor anecdote. Those thousands of 'Games Makers' who received such a great press at the London 2012 Olympics. Do you know what they used to judge the applicants at interviews? Not competencies. No – it was 'attitudes'. And it worked.

¹¹

The bottom line here, surely, is that your personal behaviours and those which you model to your staff 'must' be aligned to those organisational behaviours that you wish to see replicated right across your organisations. So, you either lead by example, or else you undermine and ultimately destroy any authenticity or authority by which you claim to be an HR professional.

CONCLUSION

Upping your game and demonstrating your true worth, was what I was originally asked by Richard Crouch to focus upon in my talk to the PPMA Seminar, and which I have developed further in this paper.

For many years, when I was focusing primarily on local government recruitment, mainly at CX level before switching to focus on central government, I used to work with a technical co-interviewer called Charles Wood, former CX of LB Brent. And when we would put aspirant CX candidates through our two- hour interviews, one of the questions Charles used to pose was this.

Within your own CX's department, you are only allowed to have a maximum of two direct reports – out of policy, comms, HR, IT, and property. Which two would you choose?

Almost everyone went for policy and one other – but that was rarely if ever HR.

Daft. Our view was that if you have a handle on the people and their skills (HR), and a handle on the message (Comms) – then you can do/achieve almost anything with the organisation.

¹¹ <http://www.engageforsuccess.org/games-makers-programme-2012/#.Um6tU6V6eII>

Even for those CX's who don't fully get the contribution that you, HR, can make, by following at least some of what I have suggested, I really think that you can hugely boost your role, your position in the organisation, and your overall credibility.

And so too can PPMA boost its status and credibility.

'Talent, Opportunity, Prosperity' is your theme for this current year. Richard talks about maximising the human talent all around us – and by that he means right across all sectors of your respective communities.

This is spot on message with Bob Kerlake. It is and remains 'of the moment'. It is totally appropriate.

I wish you well in your endeavours.

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