Centralised human resource management: A client perspective.

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ISSN 1038-7448
Working Paper No. 02/2002
August 2002
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Introduction

This paper examines some of the findings of a case study undertaken as the result of an identified need for one particular organisation to examine the most appropriate means of meeting its human resources management needs. Effective human resource management support is critical to the organisation as it is facing organisational restructure and at the same time is in a period of continued growth. A key issue confronting the organisation is that, for the previous few years, it has had limited control over the human resources strategy that supports its business.

A case study was consequently undertaken in 2000 to examine how effective the current level of support was and what if anything should be changed so that human resource management practice is consistent with the organisational values and objectives. Key objectives of the study were to better understand the inter-relationship between organisational goals and the management of human resources and to identify what this organisation requires in terms of human resource management support. The case study captured the organisation’s managers’ feelings about the level of human resource management support and the effectiveness of that support. The findings of this study suggest that the strength of these feelings and their impact on performance have significant implications for management decisions.

The significance of consultation, good communication and commitment to building relationships was highlighted and is seen to be particularly important in large and/or multi-site organisations. It is suggested that instituting centralised management structures without appropriate recognition of the individual cultures and values of constituents can result in decreased autonomy and disempowerment for these constituents. The results of this study indicate that where a culture of trust, good communication and mutual respect is not present this can lead to poor relationships, low staff morale and a lack of commitment to the organisation.
The Organisation

To protect the identity of the organisation studied it will be referred to as Org. A. Also the large multi-site and parent company that Org. A is a division of will be referred to as PC.

Org. A was first established as a small company in 1984. Since that time it had progressively grown and developed and through the years, had earned a national reputation for innovation and excellence. In 1997, it was consolidated within a larger company PC, one of the largest organisations of its type in the country. Following this amalgamation, PC comprised eight separate divisions of unequal size, each of which was geographically separate, and had different markets and areas of specialty. As each division had originally been a separate stand alone organisation with its own management structure, values, and culture. A key focus for PC was to establish a cohesive organisational structure with a set of consistent objectives. Consequently PC centralised certain business functions including human resource management. The individual divisions' human resource management personnel, although still physically located within the divisions, became accountable to and worked under the direction of a centralised human resources department (HRD). The HRD subsequently developed a human resources strategy that reflected the company's objectives and espoused philosophy of valuing and supporting its workers.

The HRM services provided to each of the divisions were established through the development of separate formalised customer agreements. Customer agreements described what services would be provided and also nominated the human resource management staffing levels to be provided on-site in each division. Org. A benefited greatly from having access to a wider body of significant expertise at the macro level of management. This advantage however, was offset by what seemed to be a loss of control over some elements of management at the local level. At the time of the amalgamation Org. A had employed a full time on-site human resources manager however as more and more human resource management functions became centralised, there was continued pressure to progressively reduce the on-site human resource management presence. Subsequently Org. A's human resources manager
resigned and since then Org. A has had no on-site human resource management staff and has accessed advice and assistance from other divisions with specialist industrial and other expertise being provided from company headquarters twenty five kilometres away.

The impact of this reduced access to human resource management personnel appears to have been significant. Although the HRD was active in developing appropriate and efficient centralised policies and procedures there was limited local assistance in implementing these new procedures. There seemed to be little capacity for the involvement of centralised human resource management staff with the Org. A line managers in restructuring, planning, establishing organisational objectives and strategies, or in ‘fixing’ problems related to staff and staffing. Some Org. A’s managers appeared to believe that the devolution of human resource management responsibilities had not happened in a planned and supported way as part of changing management practice and developing management competencies. There also appeared to be concern that line managers’ lack of expertise and their limited ability to access appropriate assistance may be seriously disadvantaging their staff.
Strategic Human Resource Management Reality

Previous research (Legge 1995; Skinner and Mabey 1997) has suggested that in many organisations the reality and the rhetoric of human resources management practice are quite different. Many organisations that espouse a philosophy of valuing and supporting their staff do not appear to enact their stated organisational values. Legge (1995) suggests that an optimum model of human resources management promotes mutual staff and organisational gains and results in a higher performing organisation, which in turn ensures continued financial viability and growth. It has further been suggested that appropriate human resources management engenders ownership and commitment among the members of an organisation.

In order to examine how effective the current level of human resource management support was at Org. A and what if anything should be changed, a case study was undertaken. This method enabled an assessment to be made about the organisation's human resource management needs against a theory of strategic human resource management and its place in the management of organisations. The study enquiry relied on multiple sources of evidence, with one of its key sources being a survey of Org. A’s managers.

The survey was in the form of individual interviews where senior managers were asked for their opinions on current human resource management practices in the organisation, and also how they viewed the match between these practices and the stated organisational values. They were also asked for their suggestions for change. It was anticipated that this information would be relevant for identifying an appropriate model to inform future HRM practice in the organisation. Interviewees were selected because of their knowledge and experience relevant to reviewing Org. A’s strategy. All the interviewees held positions of significant responsibility within the organisation and were involved in decision making at the strategic level. Staff supervision, support and deployment were key functions of their management roles.
Questions related to the interviewees' understanding of the role of human resource management in general, their experience of the enactment of that role in Org. A and their views on this experience. Also sought were interviewees' views on organisational development and their perceptions on the optimum human resource strategy for Org. A in the future.

The major theme arising from the interviews was the unreliability, both in terms of responsiveness and accuracy of information provided, of the HRD service. Other significant themes were that the human resource management function had become purely reactive rather than proactive and that where a management function has no presence it becomes less relevant. Also there was a significant gap between espoused policy and enacted practice.

The ineffectiveness and inefficiencies of the transaction system were such that all interviewees constantly reiterated their frustration and anger irrespective of the focus of the individual question. The comment by one interviewee is typical of the sentiment expressed by others:

‘Staff have enough to do without working out how to use forms, where to send them and then how to find them again when they get lost by HR’.

The lack of easily accessible advice coupled with what was construed by managers to be a lack of interest by the HRD had caused significant workload issues for some managers and the greater the staff responsibility the more impact this deficiency had. Also the managers with the greatest staff accountabilities were the ones who no longer factored the involvement of the HRD into their planning or staff management, and who openly questioned the relevance of the service they received.

The suggestion was made that on-site assistance was provided only when there were problems and that assistance then tended to take a 'big guns approach'. This view may have been related to the fact that some of the managers had not met the HRM personnel who had been allocated responsibility for providing advice to Org. A, and were unclear as to the structure of the service and the individual roles of the various people involved. This lack of a clear understanding of who does what was seen as symptomatic of generally poor communication.
processes which in turn were seen as symptomatic of a lack of interest. There was a clear perception that ‘you’ve got to have a problem before anything happens’.

The interviewees were highly critical of the levels of expertise of some of the human resources personnel they had been dealing with, and it was suggested by some that often what appeared as a lack of interest was in fact a lack of knowledge and therefore an inability to offer sound advice. One manager summed this up by saying:

‘If you don’t know the questions to ask, you have no hope of getting the information you want. I am now cautious about relying on them (HRD) or accepting what they say. I use other managers as my resource and see HRD as a last resort’.

It is possible that this related to the manager’s lack of understanding of the HRD’s structure and the consequent likelihood that advice was being sought from the wrong people in the HRD. The levels of ‘customer service’ were apparently so variable that managers only approached those personnel from whom they had previously had useful assistance, irrespective of the expertise of the particular HRD staff member. The relationship between staff skill levels and effective service was highlighted by all interviewees.

Another important theme was the lack of involvement of staff from the HRD in organisational development. Content analysis revealed three key sub themes, the lack of training and education for middle managers on managing their own staffing issues, the lack of needs identification and coordination of organisation-wide staff development and the lack of a human resource management presence at critical decision making meetings.

When discussing the necessity to manage their own staffing issues, managers emphasised their unfulfilled need for assistance. As one manager stated:

‘I don’t mind doing the paperwork that they used to do if they were doing something else, but they’re not doing anything for us’. Significant concern was expressed in relation to ‘not knowing what you don’t know’ and
therefore possibly and inadvertently disadvantaging either the staff or the organisation.

All interviewees highlighted the need for a coordinated approach to staff development and all believed staff development to be a core function of human resource management, with staff development needs at the individual, group and organisation-wide levels being able to be identified. However it was also stated by one of the interviewees that:

"In this organisation the skill development and personal development that made HR relevant to non managers is not happening'.

It was believed that developing and implementing strategies to address these needs would assist the achievement of Org. A's objectives.

There was a strong focus on the role of an effective human resource management service in setting and achieving organisational strategy and in facilitating organisational change. This was highlighted by the comment that:

"we need HR to take the rhetoric that we value our staff and come up with observable and tangible strategies that give the message to staff that they really are valued'.

The belief that the organisation had suffered from a lack of HR involvement was further emphasised by the statement from one manager that:

"we have gone backwards and are now very underdeveloped in terms of our human resource management'.

Managers expressed a desire to see a human resources manager with 'a place at the table’ when key organisational decisions were being made, and stated that 'we have been really impoverished as an organisation by not having an HR manager on site'.

The level of negativity expressed by the interviewees and the dearth of positive feedback about the service was seen to be of particular significance.
Unfavourable comparisons were repeatedly made with other organisations which were described by one manager as:

'organisations where the role of HR in challenging and assisting staff was visible and where HR was an integral part of the organisation’s functioning'.

Managers did not feel that description fitted Org. A.

When asked to describe their feelings about the human resource management issues, all managers expressed negative emotions such as 'disappointed', 'undervalued', 'missing out', 'painful', 'worrying'. Asked to explain these feelings, all associated with what they saw as a lack of commitment by the HRD to Org. A because it was too small and too far away and as a result of this there had been a devaluing of Org. A, its goals and achievements and its staff. One manager commented:

‘we are seen as the poor cousin in a large organisation’.
Discussion

The distinguishing characteristics of human resource management, as described by Gardner and Palmer (1997) and Legge (1995), are the devolution of operational tasks to line managers, an increased commitment on the part of employees as a result of changed human resource management practices, and integration with strategic corporate planning. The results of the interviews with Org. A’s managers suggested that although the combination of operational tasks with line management had already taken place, line managers were not aware of the rationale for this. A comment made by interviewee that challenged the notion that this devolution of responsibility had happened in an orderly well communicated fashion and as part of the development of a new vision for human resource management was:

‘[that line managers] now have to do the paperwork they (HR) used to do’

It was not apparent in any of the managers’ interviews that an increased commitment to the organisation had resulted from human resource management practices. Rather there were concerns that the organisation was being disadvantaged by the HRD and its practices and that it provided staff with no tangible demonstration of their value appeared to refute this proposition.

Integration with corporate strategy was clearly demonstrated in the HRD customer agreements, which identified PC’s corporate goals as the drivers for human resource management practice. However interviews with Org. A’s managers did not surface any views on integration with the current corporate objectives, and it was assumed that at a time when further organisational restructuring was imminent this issue had no importance to these managers. It could however equally be assumed that when the operational aspects of human resource management are ineffective the strategic aspects become irrelevant.

Legge (1995) has suggested that one result of the lack of enactment of the vision of strategic human resource management could be unmet expectations in employees. The data from Org. A’s managers’ interviews supports this view by highlighting disappointment over the significant difference between what was
happening in their organisation and what they had heard and read about in relation to the vision and intended practice of human resource management. This was also seen in previous studies (Marchington 1995; Skinner and Mabey 1997), the findings of which further suggest, that although integration with corporate objectives is promoted, it may be that an integrated set of practices is assumed.

Cottrell (2000) has suggested that the lack of education and training of line managers is a critical success factor in implementing new HRM practices. Org. A's managers would appear to support this as an issue by describing a supposed expectation that they would know more than they did know. This appeared to be accompanied by a high level of anxiety at being unsupported and inadvertently making mistakes that would disadvantage the staff of Org. A.

Previous studies (Skinner and Mabey 1997) have suggested that the issue of ownership may not be totally addressed by educating and training line managers to deal with their own staff issues. Ownership by middle managers has been suggested by Marchington (1995) and Skinner and Mabey (1997) to be an important part of successfully integrating human resource management practices with corporate strategy and implementing a strategic human resource management plan. It has further been suggested that in spite of its importance, ownership is not always seen in practice, a view that is supported by the findings of this study which showed regular references to ‘them’ and ‘us’ in relation to the current management of human resources. It would appear that for the successful implementation of new employment practices ownership by middle managers is crucial and it is suggested that the development of human resource management practices in consultation with middle managers will go some way towards closing the apparent gap between the rhetoric of strategic human resource management’s supporting staff and engendering commitment and the reality of current practice.

The major theme arising from the interviews with Org. A’s managers regarding ineffective and inefficient transactional service was not identified in the literature reviewed as part of the study, giving rise to the assumption that although a valid concern, it was primarily a local, organisation-specific problem. It is however equally possible that this issue represented one version of Marchington’s (1995)
view that much of the human resource management literature, by presenting a one dimensional view of current practice, fails to address ‘real’ problems in ‘real’ organisations. The anxiety and frustration that these difficulties caused to Org. A’s managers permeated each interview and tended to dominate many of their responses.

This research highlighted a lack of clarity about structures, changes in process and the reasons for these changes. Findings from previous research (Skinner and Mabey 1997) also identified poor internal communications as a major reason for failure in the implementation of strategic human resource management changes. The interviews undertaken as part of the study suggested that the managers were not clear about the differing roles and responsibilities now expected to be assumed by line managers and human resource management personnel, or about the differing roles of human resource management specialists and administrators. A lack of clarity has been noted by Laabs (2000) as an ongoing issue for organisations, their managers and their staff.

When describing their feelings about the current standards of human resource management, the managers used words which demonstrated the antithesis of the themes (Gardner and Palmer 1997) surrounding the strategic human resource management literature. Kamoche (1998) has identified the promise of an ethos of concern for employees’ needs and engendering a sense of belonging, treating employees as worthy and valued assets and a source of competitive advantage which can most effectively be nurtured by mutually beneficial policies. Findings from this study suggest that, in this particular organisation, this promise has not been fulfilled. Feelings of anger, disappointment and of being undervalued were highlighted. Further analysis has suggested an association between these feelings and a perception of a lack of commitment by the HRD to Org. A and its managers. A lack of commitment to the organisation from employees has been identified in other studies (Marchington 1995) as one possible result of the implementation of changed human resource management policies that emphasise corporate goals rather than employee value. This study has suggested that with too great an emphasis on corporate strategy, lack of commitment can be perceived from the top down as well as from the bottom up.
The feelings expressed by the managers appeared to link in part to an inability to change the situation, and consequent feelings of helplessness and disempowerment. This is in stark contrast to the premise of empowerment suggested by Marchington (1995) as an aim of changed employment practices related to strategic human resource management. While acknowledging that they could be establishing processes which would provide more support to staff even without specialised human resource management involvement, the managers displayed a reluctance to initiate this. This was attributed to lack of time coupled with high workloads, and an expressed lack of expertise. It could however, be suggested that rather than being unwilling these managers were disempowered.

For change to happen human resource management policies and practices need to be not only supported at the CEO level but also championed at that senior corporate level (Skinner and Mabey 1997; Kramar 1992). The findings from Skinner and Mabey’s (1997) study identified that commitment from the CEO does not in itself result in a progression of human resource management strategy. It appears that identifying a ‘champion’ with the necessary authority, credibility and leadership skills may also be needed to manage the process of implementing changed practices. Kramar (1992) expands on this view by suggesting the implementation of changed policies is more effective when senior management’s total support is perceived. This need for active leadership was evidenced in the interviews with Org A’s managers who not only suggested a need for a change facilitator who could contribute at the key decision making level but also identified a sense of not knowing where to seek assistance. It appeared that leadership by positioning human resource management alongside corporate goals and with the internal practices was a further organisational need.

The issue of trust arose as a theme and was highlighted by the managers’ comments that the human resource management service had no credibility and needed to build trust from the staff. These views supported current opinion (Sheldrake 2000; Gratton 2000; Fairholm and Fairholm 2000) that trust is both an important element of leadership and a necessity for building the relationships which enable the implementation of different practices.
Conclusion

For this organisation, the result of a centralised model of human resource management has been a loss of autonomy, a loss of control of the structures necessary to support individual organisational functioning and a feeling of disempowerment.

No involvement of human resource management expertise in restructuring, planning, or establishing organisational objectives and strategies was evidenced. Although there was active centralised development of policies and procedures there was no assistance in local implementation. Furthermore, anecdotal evidence prior to the study suggested that some of the Org. A managers were concerned that the devolution of many aspects of human resource management had not happened in a planned and supported way as part of changing management practice and as a means of further developing their management competencies. The findings have supported this premise and have demonstrated that the managers’ concern is exacerbated by their anxiety about the possible adverse outcomes of their lack of knowledge. Previous studies of the impact of strategic human resource management changes (Skinner and Mabey 1997) have found the support of middle managers to manage their own human resources practices to be crucial to success in implementing new employment practices.

It has been shown by Legge (1995) that commitment between organisations and employees is a major theme in the language of strategic human resource management, which promotes the ideals of mutual benefit and the achievement of corporate goals, while recognising the value of staff. Legge (1995) has identified a further theme of emphasis on the development of policies and the establishment of practices to engender employee commitment and consequently improve an organisation’s competitive advantage. The assumption appears to be that where standards of practice do not reflect these ideals, there may be a resultant weakening of employees’ commitment to the organisation and a lowering of morale. The outcomes of this study have shown support for these assumptions and further suggest that just as not enacting the principles of strategic human resource management will result in a lack of commitment by
employees to the organisation, so too will it be seen as a lack of commitment by the organisation to employees. This perceived lack of commitment to them lowers staff morale and erodes their commitment to the organisation. The mutuality of commitment is suggested by this project to be of significance.

Ownership was demonstrated by the study to be a notable factor in the current circumstances of this particular organisation and in achieving the aim of turning the rhetoric of strategic human resource management into the reality of high standards of practice. The project results suggest that, particularly in large multi-site organisations, there is a need for senior management leadership to provide the link between the corporate decision making and human resource management policy development. The need to ensure that local implementation of changed employment practices reflects the uniqueness, varying needs and cultural differences of the varying constituents of amalgamated organisations was emphasised. The findings also demonstrated that ownership by all levels of management, as previously noted by Kramar (1992), is an important and necessary element of establishing changed practices.

The importance of trust and trust relationships was highlighted by the findings which showed that failure to enact espoused philosophies, combined with inefficient practices, have eroded trust by Org. A’s managers in the operation of the human resource management function. The development of procedures which effectively, efficiently and reliably support the organisation’s day to day operations and underpin the credibility and trust that now needs to be built in this organisation. The findings of this study are consistent with Ferlie and Pettigrew’s (1998) conclusions that trust relationships are key components of effective organisations.

The themes of commitment, ownership and trust that characterised the findings of this study were found to be connected with each other and with strategic human resource management philosophies and practices. The demonstration of associated behaviours was judged to be an imperative in developing and implementing human resource management strategies which would further organisational objectives. Without these behaviors, it appears, the philosophies of strategic human resource management will remain rhetoric and will not
contribute to engendering commitment from staff and demonstrating commitment to staff.

Legge's (1995) premise that the fundamental precepts of strategic human resource management are not being enacted has been corroborated by the findings of this study. At the same time the study expanded on the view that if only CEO commitment is forthcoming then the principles of strategic human resource management would be seen in practice by finding that ownership at all levels and areas of the organisation is necessary and often lacking.
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