

How HR can help transform an organisation from within

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There is no doubt that the demands and expectations placed on human resources (HR) functions have risen dramatically since the economic downturn. They are no longer just administrative units managing the recruitment and people processes of an organisation: leadership looks to HR to drive the whole talent strategy that will keep them ahead of the competition.

And as the recruitment landscape remains as tough and competitive as ever, I believe that HR needs to look internally just as much (or even more) as it looks externally to achieve the kind of talent transformation that is needed for an organisation to get ahead and stay ahead in the market.

From my experience of working with organisations from across sectors, I believe that there are a series of relatively simple steps that need to be taken to achieve this (though they are less straightforward to actually implement!).

With a real commitment of time and energy, leadership and HR can bring about genuine transformations. This can apply from the top to the bottom of an organisation – from senior management right down to junior and support functions. One of the most undervalued areas, in my experience, is middle management. I often refer to this area as the

“frozen middle”, seeing as many organisations have a large rump of talented middle managers who, though they may be performing well individually, are usually capable of much, much more if only their true collective potential could be unlocked.

The power of context

First, and perhaps most importantly of all, leadership and HR need to truly understand the importance of what I call an organisation's context. Context is decisive. It is the invisible environment in which we live and work, shaped by a variety of beliefs and behaviours. When people talk about “what it's like to work here” or “how difficult it is to get things done around here”, what they are actually talking about is the context or environment in which work takes place.

Context exists at many different levels: individual, team, departmental, divisional, national and even global (depending on the size and scope of the organisation). As leaders and managers, if you have the ability to shift the context for yourself and your organisation, then you will be able to develop the capability to deliver extraordinary results. When you alter context, you automatically alter people's subsequent actions.

But if you cannot see the underlying assumptions that make up the context, your ability to consistently change things is compromised.

The six steps

Once you understand the context or contexts at play, you can begin to set about making real changes that will inspire people to significantly improve their performance and bring about the kind of talent transformation that is leadership's holy grail.

There are six steps – here is a quick summary of each one:

1. *Letting go of the past:* People naturally base today's actions on past experiences. But using your past as a point of reference binds you only to those possibilities that lie within the boundaries of what you know. People then normalise the present condition – “it's always like this”; “it happens every year” – so that nothing ever really changes: everything remains within the bounds of past experience.

So the first key step is to break from the past/present – by setting a seemingly impossible goal and absolutely committing to it.

2. *Developing breakthrough ambition:* Very often, visions and mission statements are simply not bold enough. You need to define what you *really* want for the organisation, declare it and establish compelling reasons for

change. A good example is Microsoft – they set a goal of “A PC in every home”. It might sound unremarkable now, but at the time, it seemed unthinkable and raised everybody's aspirations from what they previously thought possible.

3. *Creating a bold new vision of the future:* A vision of the future needs to be created that is bold and empowering and that taps into emotions to align the organisation with a clear and meaningful purpose. It needs to create a new context that is meaningful to individuals. Often, “burning platforms” are very effective – a kind of “do or die” scenario in which you need to surface and manage negative emotions or fears and create unpredictable circumstances, as these often result in people performing beyond their normal capacity.
4. *Defining the new game:* Leaders need to redefine what people believe is possible and identify what is missing. They need to look at issues through new lenses – often by taking inspiration from outside the business. For example, in the 1990's Great Ormond Street hospital redesigned its theatre operating practices by looking at how Ferrari ran their pit-stops – an example of incredible “out of the box” thinking that helped define the new game. Perhaps this thinking could help transform accident and emergency (A&E) departments

that are presently under so much pressure.

5. *Keeping future-focussed:* It is essential to keep focussed on the future goal that everyone is trying to reach – rather than simply “commentating” on what is happening now. Commentators do not change anything, they only record. You need to avoid getting stuck in the present and make sure that conversations are forward-looking and based around the future goal.
6. *Gaining energy from setbacks:* To succeed, you must be prepared to encounter setbacks. They are inevitable. It is important not to be scared of bad news, or to hide it. Rather, open and honest conversations are needed, so that solutions can be found and the process can be engaged in again with renewed and greater energy.

One of the really key factors in making this work is the mindset of HR and business leadership. They need to see that their primary role is not to simply “control and manage”. It is to unlock potential and creativity – to allow their teams to perform to their full ability.

Once this is in place, all sorts of possibilities open up, allowing talent to reach its full potential and the organisation to hit new heights.

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