Addressing the isolation of the

HR Manager

A LEAP discussion document

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1. HR Leaders – a lonely role in context:

When the Senior Management Team of the organisation sit around the table, there is a comfortable ambience among the team members be they Operations, Logistics, R&D, Finance and other technical disciplines directly aligned with what the company does, as they collectively discuss areas they are comfortable with. Unfortunately, when it comes to people management the conversation can get clunky and the default too often becomes: "That's a HR matter." A cop out, which is both debilitating to all involved and creates a ridiculous burden on the HR Manager.

There are many other ways the role of HR Manager and the norms of the organisation can increase the sense of isolation, which can if not addressed have a disabling effect on the HR Leader and their team.

2. Isolation comes in many forms:

As the recognised HR leader in the organisation often results in the HR Manager being isolated in many areas:

• Managing weak management practices and in-effective managers
• Having to be the default expert on all people and performance matters – for everyone
• Multitude of areas to address – as strategic HR looks to support the ongoing strategic development of the business
• The sounding board and confidant for the senior people, who need someone to turn to re thorny people management issues, particularly if it is a senior colleague.

When there is a people management issue, HR becomes the manager's best friend, when the management are not delivering on:

• A leadership team that can't lead, if lucky hide behind their functional management competency
• The much-vaunted company strategy is not being implemented as there is not the expertise (at multiple levels) to do so
• Poor performance is pushed under the carpet – or "Is a HR issue."
• Company culture not conducive to attracting and developing talent, in an increasingly competitive employment environment

Some of this will look like the current state of play in most companies. Ironically the above challenges are the easy bit as they are known issues for which collective buy-in by the management team can ensure that efforts are made to address them

However, it is the following areas as articulated by the McKinsey people that pose a far greater challenge for the HR Leader:

2.1 The HR challenges:

1. Change Management

Building change management capability in HR to drive more value from business transformation

2. Organisation Design

Designing and implementing organisational restructures, often following a change in the operating model

3. Talent Acquisition

Finding the capability to meet short-, medium- and long-term business goals

4. Talent Management

Building internal capability now and for future succession

5. Performance Management

Improving accountability, feedback, development and succession planning to improve business results and sustainability

6. Leadership Development

Structured companywide approach to developing leadership capabilities at all levels
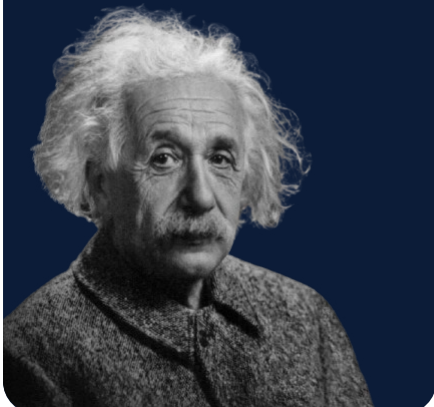
7. Workplace Culture

How to focus on organisation culture

3. Starting with Clarity:

> **If I were given one hour to save the planet, I would spend 59 minutes defining the problem and one minute resolving it**
>
> **Albert Einstein.**

3.1 Part 1 :What is HR Management:

Not that HR are the problem! however, HR need to define with as much clarity as possible: what is there role and equally important what is not their role.

A clear sighted definition of HR Management and the related goals:

> *"Human resource management is a strategic, integrated and coherent approach to the employment, development and well-being of the people working in organisations."* *(Armstrong, 2016:7)*

Moving beyond the general definition to specific areas of focus, greatly increasing clarity and understanding within the internal HR team and the organisation as a whole is provided by the following:

3.1.1   The goals of HR Management:
Drawing on the original theory, Armstrong and Taylor (2015) identify the goals of HR Management as to:
• Support the organisation in achieving its objectives by developing and implementing HR strategies that are integrated with business strategy

• Contribute to the development of a high-performance culture
• Ensure that the organisation has the talented, skilled and engaged people it needs
• Create a positive employment relationship between management and employees and a climate of mutual trust
• Encourage the application of an ethical approach to people management.

In looking to achieve the above the HR Leader faces somewhat of a twofold conundrum. Firstly, if they are not seen to be front and centre in addressing the above, then how can they prove their value to the organisation; and secondly no matter how brilliantly they work to implement the above they are largely at the mercy of the management team at all levels to implement and support the identified initiatives. No one said it would be easy!

Having clearly articulated the HR Management role, the next step is to provide clarity as to how to access if the HR Management is delivering. Let the customer – the internal managers demonstrate.

3.2 Part 2: How do we know HR Management is working:

> ❝
> **"If you don't mind who gets the credit you can achieve great things."**
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> **Harry Truman, USA President**

How will the organisation know that the HR Management function is doing a good job.? One of the best indicators will be:

Better implementation and better ownership by line managers of HR practices.

This will require a very active and agile engagement by HR Management with the line managers to:
• Identify how input in the area of people management demonstrably benefits them
• Involve them in the development and the testing of the practices
• Ensure practices are not too complicated, bureaucratic or time-consuming
• Ensure their responsibilities are defined and communicated clearly
• Provide them with the guidance, support and training required to implement the practice.

Armstrong and Taylor (2015:49)

In achieving the above the HR Manager will have demonstrated a fantastic contribution to the organisation. However, that might not be enough to get to the top table. The challenge for the HR Leader is considerably steeper. It is how well the HR Leaders can demonstrate capability to dea with the incoming challenges, which are multiple, and highly varied. How they will play out in each individual organisation is unknown. The HR Leader that can deliver in this space becomes a vital member of the leadership team – on merit.

Ultimately the evidence that the HR Leadership function is working will be demonstrated in how the organisation embraces the multiple incoming challenges from successful change management to successful workplace culture as referenced above (in HR Challenges). What do these obstacles look like.

4. The Obstacle is the Way:

Ryan Holliday acclaimed self-help author has some interesting perspectives on how best to interact with the world around us. One of his insights is: "The Obstacle is the Way." The challenges we face are the way to growth and development. So instead of avoiding obstacles walk towards them and find ways to raise your game and overcome obstacles, treat them as an opportunity and not something to be avoided.

Being a HR leader you have plenty of known challenges within the organisation and plenty of unknown challenges that the organisation is heading towards, these potential obstacles will need new ideas and approaches if they are to be addressed successfully.

Unfortunately, the HR Leader will not be judged by how well it completes the goals of effective HR Management, they will only be judged by how well they contribute to the company's goals as mentioned earlier – 2.1 The HR Challenges (McKinsey).

4.1 Change Management

Change Management – building change management capability in HR to drive more value from business transformation.

What does change management capability in HR look like, it means developing capabilities in a variety of complimentary areas, which we will look at further in this section. However, the more primary requirement for the HR Leader in enabling change management across the company is to be at the top table when the organisation strategy is being developed and deployed. The HR Leader must be a credible and valued member of the company's Leadership Team. The easy part is to be a member of the Leadership Team, the credibility element will be achieved through tangible evidence of the significant impact the HR Leader is making by bringing, practical HR expertise to the top table, which is readily applicable to delivering success on the ground.

4.2 Organisation Design

Organisation Design – designing and implementing organisational restructures, often following a change in the operating model

Organisational restructure sounds like a nice clean exercise, however it is fraught with challenges. Primary among them is the human condition of getting comfortable with existing structures, norms and working relationships. Add managers tendencies to develop fiefdoms, and there is the potential for the situation to quickly regress, not progress. This is where the influencing and communication skills of the HR Leader will be well tested. They will also need to ensure that initial successes are continuously built upon so that the new model takes firm hold.

4.3 Talent Acquisition

Talent Acquisition – finding the capability to meet short-, medium- and long-term business goals

It is an employee's market, and how companies address this obstacle will have a significant impact on how they achieve their business goals. The potential employee is asking a raft of questions:
• Will I fit in and be appreciated – is there a good cultural fit for me?
• What will my future look like in – will I grow and develop, and will I be rewarded accordingly?
• Will this company satisfy my personal career ambitions?

On behalf of the company there are also a several pertinent questions:
• Is the candidate a good fit for our organisation's culture, the old mantra you hire for skills and knowledge, and you fire for attitude?
• Will the new employee have the patience and resilience to learn the technical ropes and value-based behaviours critical to the ongoing success of the team and organisation?
• Will the candidate be able to play to their strengths and deliver on their potential in the role they are being asked to fill?

4.4 Talent Management

Talent Management – building internal capability now and for future succession.

How is the organisation treating its "Local Heroes," the people who bring the positive energy and dynamism to their role and in how they interact with the wider team. Because the A players are making a great contribution they can become victims of two dangerous yet natural defaults. One their development is ignored and two they can become the easy default to lump more work onto, particularly the

stuff that their colleagues (including their manager) are not keen on doing.

The high performers, the company's key talent need nurturing and ongoing two-way communication, with respect to how to keep challenging them, to be actively enabling their development, ignore them at your peril. This is where the great managers really deliver, in how they can enable their best performers grow and develop – and move on within the organisation.

Talent Management differs significantly from Performance Management in that it is exclusively forward looking, whereas Performance Management predominantly reviews the past, to progress the future performance.

4.5 Performance Management

Performance Management – improving accountability, feedback, and development to improve business results.

It is almost a universal in companies, that the Performance Management system, is clunky at best, usually defaulting to a tick box exercise and is unsatisfactory for both the manager and the employee.

It needs to be re-framed, it is much more about employee engagement – their emotional commitment to the company, than it is about their performance, as their emotional commitment will drive an effective, committed contribution.

How does an organisation know if its Performance Management System is working. Well Google have done the heavy lifting here, as referenced by *Charles Duhigg, Smarter, Faster, Better.*

In 2015 within Google they were looking to identify what norms were common in their high performing teams (Project Aristotle). What they found is a compelling framework for an effective Performance Management System, deployed by effective managers:

The norms of high performing teams (in Google):
• Teams need to feel that their work is important
• Teams need to feel their work is personally meaningful
• Teams need clear goals and defined roles
• Team members need to know that they can depend on one another
• But most important, teams need psychological safety

Managers need to model, live the right behaviours to enable the above norms to take hold and flourish in their team and in so doing will provide a compelling framework for great individual and collective performance.

4.6 Leadership Development

Leadership Development – Structured company-wide approach to developing leadership capabilities at all levels

The leadership team are one of the most neglected cohorts in Irish companies, when it comes to personal development. Some of it is their own fault, as they can be the last to recognise or acknowledge that they need help in their role as a leader. Many hide behind the management competence they have in their functional area, such as Finance, Operations, Quality etc. Unfortunately, it does not serve them, their teams or the organisation well. There could well be a lack of confidence on the individual leader's part, in demonstrating the vulnerability – strength to acknowledge that they need help. There can be a lazy un-written rule that a leader can't show weakness, difficult for growth to occur individually and collectively as this norm plays out.

The lack of the means to enable leadership development can be greatly compounded when there is a high level of dysfunctionality in the Leadership Team. This can manifest in a member of the team being well out of their depth but have inherited a role and has ended up at the leadership table, a regular elephant in the room. It can also be a consequence of: "familiarity breeds contempt," where old battle scars can be hard to heal on many sides. Then again it can be the successful autocratic leader, who drives on and the followers around the table go with the flow.

4.7 Workplace Culture

Workplace Culture – How to focus on organisation culture

One of the newer senior management roles to appear in the last few years is that of Director of People and Culture. Fantastic progress in recognising the importance of Culture in enabling the people in the organisation, and therefore the organisation itself.

Finally living the company values through a collective understanding and application of the related behaviours, is seen as critical to a company's success. It is no longer lip-service. However it is a significant challenge, particularly as it needs to be owned by everyone in the organisation. It can be too easy for some of the senior old guard, to fully endorse the company values at a conscious level, but continue on their merry way, with old norms and habits at a sub-conscious level. This can totally undermine the bedding down of agreed winning behaviours and can lead to a quiet corrosion of the company values and related culture.

4.8 The HR Leader's challenge – The Obstacle is the Way

All the above challenges will resonate with HR Leaders throughout the country. Instead of avoiding these challenges the HR Leader needs to embrace them. In doing so, in making a perceived obstacle the way, the HR Leader and the organisation have to raise their game to address the challenges. The HR Leaders Forum is a proven means to enable HR Leaders to address challenging obstacles.

It can be overwhelming for any individual, even with the wholehearted support of fellow leaders in the organisation. Unfortunately, credibility is vital, so whatever HR initiatives are deployed to address the above challenges, they need to work, short term wins, to bed down the programme are critical. A sure-footed way to implement new HR initiatives, is mandatory. This is daunting. This should not be done on one's own, in isolation. Help is at hand in the form of a proven framework – the HR Leaders Forum.

5. The HR Leaders Forum

The HR Leader faces a considerable array of obstacles as it looks to provide ongoing effective HR leadership (in isolation), that consistently improves business performance and bottom-line results.

Is there an effective mechanism whereby this can be achieved. Yes, through a collaborative, expert peer support group, that provide disciplined ongoing evaluation of new initiatives; combined with ongoing access to international proven best practices and managed by highly proficient HR Executive Coaches.

The first questions any HR Leaders will ask are: "Will the HR Leader Forum help me address my daily challenges?

• Get the balance right between being an employee advocate and a company representative
• People, teams and culture are complicated – so HR is often learning on the job when the stakes are high
• Managers want a quick fix and someone else to deal with messy people and performance issues
• Senior management teams not always aware of how to use HR as a strategic partner so it is forced to operate at a tactical level.

5.1 What is the HR Leaders Forum:

A structured framework High Performing Human Resource leaders to come together to:
• Discuss their experiences, challenges and opportunities
• Share best practices and build a peer network of local HR leaders
• Help each other resolve HR issues being dealt with in their business at this time
• Upgrade their knowledge, skills and confidence in navigating their roles
• Draw on the experiences of an expert coach with deep expertise in HR Thereby enabling HR to become a strategic contributor to the development of the business

5.2 How the HR Leaders Forum works:

A rolling 12-month programme with:
- Expert facilitator, who has a long-time international career in Human Resource Management
- Peer group meetings every 2 months of 2 hours duration where you can discuss your collective issues and explore solutions
- Four x 90-minute in-house sessions for each participant with our expert coach (programme facilitator) to allow you to work on any HR topics you want to address in more detail
- HR Insights: On-going correspondence and communication from the expert coach regarding latest practices and ideas from the world of HR
- Expert Speakers: High calibre expert speakers with a wealth of experience sharing a particular successful best practice.

5.3 Why the HR Leaders Forum works:

We all need the opportunity to step away from the day to day grind and find opportunities to step back from the constant urgent and have some time to reflect on and progress the important. The HR Leaders forum enables this through:
- Dedicated time and space to assess and reflect on specific HRM requirements
- Highly capable peer support and input; from equivalent working environment
- Shared understanding as to challenges and how to resolve them
- Opportunity to take a detached look at the evolution of HRM within the organisation

6. What has been the Business Impact of the HR Leaders Forum

Since the inception of the HR Leaders Forums, the impact on the participants and their organisations has been substantial as the following demonstrates:

1. HR Leader becomes more strategic:

HR Leader moved from an administratively focused role to a more strategic role as she learned about how other companies are using their HR teams to solve business issues. The fact that she could provide working examples of initiatives she was looking to deploy in her own company, enabled those initiatives to be adopted successfully. Having an external expert, (the facilitator of the HR Leaders Forum), available to help advice the organisation as the new HR initiative was being bedded down was another key enabler.

2. HR Leaders exposed to new best practices, which they can successfully deploy internally:

With the increasing challenge of getting the most from the internal team, Several participating companies are implementing Talent Review and Succession Planning programmes based on tools and templates shared at the Forum. This is a particularly influential HR initiative as it directly challenges the Leadership Team with respect to how well are they managing and developing their team, specifically their direct reports. It moves the company away from legacy organisation structures to a fit for purpose org. structure, and equally fit for purpose team in the key roles.

3. HR Leader no longer starting with a blank page:

Forum members share policies and procedures with one another on an ongoing basis which saves each of them having to start from zero each time. The added value that each specific policy and procedure is working prior to it's adoption, by the HR Leader for their company greatly re-assures local managers and greatly improves the successful implementation of same.

4. HR Leaders provided with structured solutions (from high calibre guest speakers):

The HR Leaders are consistently getting the opportunity to explore best practices through guest speakers on a range of topics including: building company culture, change management and quarterly people reviews.

5. Strategic HR:

The validation of the HR Leaders Forum is demonstrated when the Strategic HR framework is fully aligned with the company's ongoing deployment of it's new company wide strategy for growth. This is the legacy of the leadership team making People and Culture central to the development of the company's capabilities and growth. This is enabling the company to deliver substantial sustained growth year on year.

7. HR Leaders in Action – Case Studies

7.1   Allegro's successful deployment of the Talent Review and Succession Planning Methodology

At Allegro we have successfully deployed the Talent Review and Succession Planning (TR&SP) methodology. What made the successful deployment possible was the detailed framework, that had been tested and delivered successfully in organisations similar to our own. As I looked to bring the methodology into Allegro, having the opportunity to discuss and familiarise myself with the programme through the HR Leaders Forum, was critical to gain a clear understanding and determine an effective approach for our deployment in the company.

One of the bigger requirements was to demonstrate to the Leadership Team the difference between Performance Reviews and Succession Planning. Despite initial hesitation by the Leadership Team to map their teams onto the TR&SP framework, once they saw that the emphasis is about preparing the organisation's team and structure to deal with future challenges and opportunities and to provide them individually to reflect on the composition and capabilities of their own team, they full bought into the process.

The collective review of the key people by the Leadership Team, was immediately recognised as a vital function of the Leadership Team and they recognised that the structured methodology was a means for them to do so in a very professional manner. They greatly appreciated the opportunity to internalise this key leadership discipline.

The collective forward-looking approach that Talent Review and Succession Planning requires has provided significant clarity as to who and what areas of the business need focus and attention to enable the successful ongoing evolution of the company, in these challenging times.

- Emma Healy, HR Manager at Allegro

7.2 The impact of not starting with a blank page for Galway Simon Community

When you move into the role of the HR Manager, it can be a bit frightening. All of a sudden, all eyes turn to you when there is a people related issue, regardless of your lack of proximity to the situation or the fact that there are line managers in place, who are meant to be addressing the relevant issues. Thankfully as I moved into the HR Managers role help was at hand. It was the HR Leaders Forum.

The importance of being able to join a peer group, with similar challenges and learn how they were able to resolve them or not, was very reassuring. The HR Leaders Forum helped me get up to speed much quicker

in my HR managers role. It gave me the sounding board for some initial challenges while also exposing me to best practices in a variety of areas, some of which I was able to deploy internally, with good effect.

I underestimated the potential isolation, that the HR managers role can entail. Everyone turns to you with their HR – people issue, but who do you turn to for advice, and particularly expert advice. Thankfully the HR Forum brilliantly provides that ongoing support. With an experienced HR expert facilitating the programme, who I can bounce ideas off and with the peer-to-peer group support, I know that help and support is available if I need it.

I am now at the stage of looking at deploying more comprehensive HR practices across the organisation and look forward to being able to do so, with the expertise and support that I can tap into.

- Michelle Flannery, HR Manager, Galway Simon Community

7.3   Access to successful HR Initiatives helps to fuel growth

The LEAP team down through the years have assisted us greatly with multiple people centric initiatives and LEAP's HR Leaders Forum is another example of an innovative approach to supporting people development in organisations. For companies to get a clear line of sight to successful HR best practices deployed elsewhere, combined with the means and support to deploy them effectively inhouse, has proven to be a very effective collaborative approach between ourselves and the LEAP team.

For us the investment in a Head of People and Culture was a natural consequence of our long-term focus on our people and how to ensure we provide them with the opportunity to grow and develop with the company and enjoy themselves along the way. The specialist focused expertise that our People and Culture Manager brings is invaluable as we look to deploy our strategic plan, to build the company and the capabilities of all team members.

- Brian Keville, MD, MKO

Long may the adventure continue!