

HR Parenting: *enabling or disabling managers?*



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Aspire Strategic HR & OD Business Partner Programme

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1. Background and Objectives

Today's Human Resource (HR) function dates back nearly 80 years, historically the HR function has been that of managing the provision of core transactional people services such as payroll, recruitment administration etc. Growing pressure from government on public organisations to emulate private sector managerial practices, including performance management, and a heightened strategic focus has witnessed the reform of structures, processes and systems to increase efficiency and cost-effectiveness.

A modern and commercially aware public service requires a motivated and engaged workforce, brave, skilled managers and inspirational and influential leaders with compelling visions and clear organisation priorities. Literature tells us that the role of the modern HR has shifted from being a service fulfilling all the needs and wishes of managers to a business partner supporting the business in its growth and competitiveness.

This research focuses on the relationship between HR and the front line manager. Is HR seen as an enabling function supporting management autonomy in implementing HR processes or are they viewed as disabling autocrats.

According to CIPD; the term 'front-line manager' refers to those who supervise and manage employees who themselves have no supervisory responsibilities, often promoted from operational roles and potentially no formal management education at the time of their appointment.

Findings in a 2013 report conducted by Roffey Park Institute revealed that the majority of managers like the transactional HR and the support it offers them. As HR becomes more strategic managers can be left feeling unsupported in areas such as conducting grievance and disciplinary procedures. It appears from the report that no one wants to take responsibility of basic performance management, this may well go on to explain why performance management remains a major challenge in many organisations including our own. Three years on from this report, have our front line managers within the project scope taken responsibility for people management issues and especially performance management and if not what can we as HR do to support them without resorting to the parent / child relationship.

As a project team we are looking at HR parenting. The aim of this research is to focus on whether our HR functions are enabling our front line managers with the tools to have the confidence, knowledge and skills to cope with daily people management or are we disabling them, being restrictive with policies and procedures. To do this we aimed to;

- Identify whether our HR functions are providing managers with the tools they need
- Identify whether there any circumstances preventing them from taking action
- Make recommendations based on the outcome of the project research

2. Methodology and Scope

In this study, we analyse the views of front line managers and HR professionals from public sector organisations in the UK with the aim of evaluating whether or not the role of the HR function enables or disables managers with regard to people management.

In order to answer this question we have undertaken the following research, through examining previous related studies and literature. Anecdotally; through our own experiences observations and discussions whilst performing our Business Partner function. A questionnaire was used to collect data from our population of interest using open and closed questions. North West and North East Employers were used as the conduit for the distribution of the questionnaire which was produced using survey monkey. Interviews with managers also took place in each of our organisations to allow a more detailed viewpoint.

A review was undertaken from the plethora of relevant literature and research already produced, to identify whether our own HR functions are really in a position to empower managers with regard to people management allowing HR to undertake a more strategic and less transactional responsibility.

Anecdotally the project teams collective role of Business Partner, has identified that a number of front line managers within the three organisations of the project scope are technically skilled however are ill equipped in the skill of people management to be truly effective. Managers are the biggest components for HR policy implementations, but without HR advice and guidance they may not implement them, and too often run to the HR parent to resolve issues or stop them from escalating into potential tribunal issues. Research suggests that HR must empower their front line managers and stop parenting

3. Stakeholders

Project sponsors: This project was commissioned by Julie Comb, Strategic Workforce Development Manager, Calderdale Council. Pip Schofield, Head of HR, Middlesbrough Council. Sarah Nattrass, Area Manager OD, County Durham and Darlington Fire and Rescue. The project sponsors have provided the financial support and enabled the time required to develop and undertake the project.

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Project Mentors: Adele Humble, Kirklees Council. Julie Holt, Warrington Borough Council. The project mentors have provided motivation and guidance required to develop the report and prepare for formal presentations.

Project Team Members: As part of the Aspire Business Partner Programme, delivered by North West Employers and CIPD, Mandy Fairbank, Nicola Finnegan and Michelle Pike undertook research to explore the relationship between front line managers and the HR function. All members have invested the time to research and to produce a project report and presentation that adds value to their own development and learning and produce some insight and recommendations for their sponsors.

4. Background

Business Partner 'Model'

Ulrich's business partner model was launched in 1997 with the aim of helping HR professionals integrate and align to business processes and outcomes. However, 20 years on and in many organisations this is only just being implemented and in other it just isn't working. In November 2008 in an article for HR Magazine David Ulrich and Wayne Brockbank reflected on the model 10 years on. They describe four categories that HR professionals can fit in to Corporate, Embedded, Specialist and Service Centre and state then any of these can be partners to the business. This is demonstrated by the wide variety of roles carried by Business Partners but also can create confusion for operational services knowing what a business partner is.

They refer in the article to several potential reasons for failure including the adaptability of existing HR staff and resistance to change, the make-up of the organisation including the degree to which business performance can be influenced and finally HR professionals not being accepted by managers as significant contributors.

In 2016 in the same magazine Jenny Roper discusses whether the Ulrich model is still valid in modern rapidly evolving organisations. Interestingly Ulrich himself comments that his work was never a 'model' and he feels too much focus is placed on the structure element. The article quotes Brett Walsh of Deloitte as describing the transformation as a journey to be completed in several parts rather than the implementation of a structured model and an expectation that this will immediately improve services. Some organisations are still trying to implement the original model without seeming to reflect on further discussions around the topic.

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Challenges in the Public Sector

Public sector organisations have been the subject of recurrent budget reductions for many years and this is unlikely to change in the coming years. They are increasingly scrutinised to reduce waste and make better use of their resources. A drive to use technology to make services more efficient has led to a step change in the way services are delivered and an overall reduction in staff.

For many managers they are now managing additional services with less resources and feeling the strain of the self-service push. These changes are ever increasing and in danger of overwhelming them. It has to be acknowledged that managers need space and time to take on new skills and responsibilities and they cannot be expected to do this overnight. They still need support, training and guidance to build their confidence.

The reduction in staffing levels and introduction of new ways of working has exposed issues around staff capability which has led to a spike in people management issues. Managers are now having to deal with performance capability issues and get used to a different way of working. The introduction of agile working means managing by output rather than managing by attendance at work. This is against the background of on-going austerity measures which have brought about the need to constantly restructure and re-model leading in many cases to compulsory redundancies which have not previously been common in the public sector. This has all brought added pressure to managers at all levels and to HR practitioners and advisers.

HR Resources

HR services themselves have seen the same significant staffing reductions, examples from our own organisations reflect a 50% reduction in HR staffing. HR need to create capacity by reducing its involvement in operational transactional activity.

Staff are key to the transformational changes required in HR but this in itself brings challenges. As described by Ulrich some HR professionals are either unwilling or unable to make the transition to new ways of working and the adaptation of new technology. The Deloitte report Global Human capital Trends 2014 suggests that investment is needed in reskilling HR with professional development focussed on business critical skills.

It takes time to make this kind of transition particularly in a public sector environment and will inevitably lead to the departure of some staff. This is evidenced in our organisations as the reality of future requirements emerges.

For the remaining staff in HR finding innovative solutions, building knowledge and professional development are key to improving our reputation of HR.

5. Research

As a project team we looked at HR Parenting, research suggests that HR must empower their line managers and stop parenting in order for HR to become more strategic.

In order to substantiate our project, questionnaires were compiled; data was collected primarily by anonymous survey open from the 6/16/2016 - 7/15/2016. The questionnaire was circulated using survey monkey via North West and North East Regional Employers Organisations, in addition to Tyne and Wear; County Durham and Darlington and Cleveland Fire and Rescue Services as well as Middlesbrough; Calderdale; Warrington and Kirklees Councils

Participants were service delivery managers and practitioners of HR with managerial responsibility. A total of 71 responses to the survey were received which gave a really good cross section of both groups and a substantial base for our findings.

Each member of the group also undertook to carry out a more in depth interview with a representative service delivery manager and HR manager from their own organisations.

6. Findings

Survey Part One

The first part of our survey concentrated on the respondents, the positions they held and the responsibilities and training they have received.

A total of 71 responses were received. Of the 69 responses, 20 of the respondents were HR professionals with managerial responsibilities and 49 (71%) were service delivery managers, 2 respondents skipped the question.

Of the 71 respondents, 21 people manage 5 or less staff, 20 manage 5-10 staff, and 30 manage more than 10 staff.

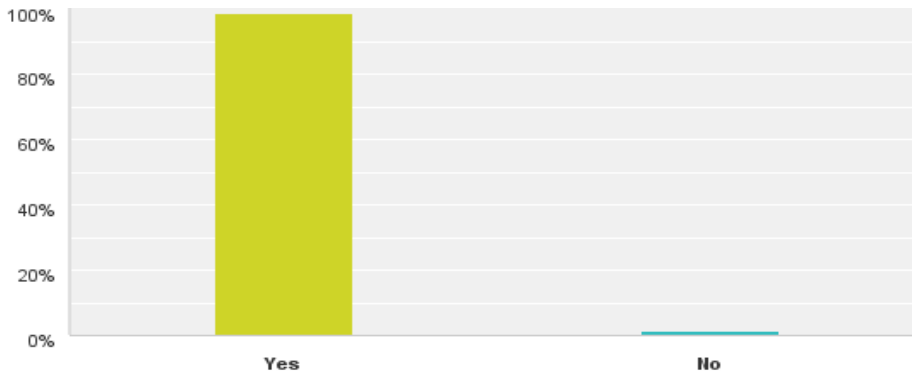
Whilst all respondents described dealing with the full range of HR activities 22% stated they had not received any training to deal with people management issues in their current organisation. This figure was consistent regardless of the size of team managed.

For those who had received training 15% felt that the training had not met their needs quoting issues like "training provided 2 years ago" and "training was aimed at a specific policy which has now been amended".

Survey Part Two

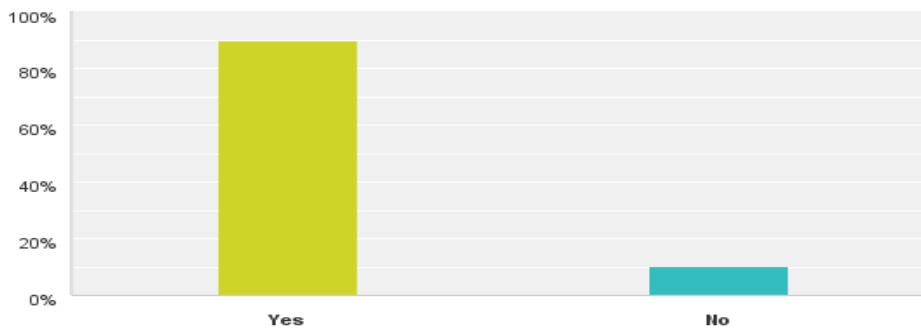
The second page of the survey related to policy, procedures, toolkits and templates and whether manager knew how to access these and whether they were easy to follow.

Q8: Do you know how to access HR policies and procedures?



It is clear from the responses from all managers (99%) that they know how to access the relevant people policies and procedures. This is a positive reflection on the work that HR has carried out to promote the presence of policies and procedures and make documents easily accessible for all through the use of digital media.

Q9: Are they easy to follow?



A further positive finding from the survey was that overwhelming (90%) managers think that the policies and procedures are easy to follow however feedback on their views on how to improve things was very useful. 4 respondents stated that policies can become outdated and need to be reviewed regularly and a further 4 respondents suggested a shortened managers guidance type approach or flowcharts to avoid having to go through lengthy policies.

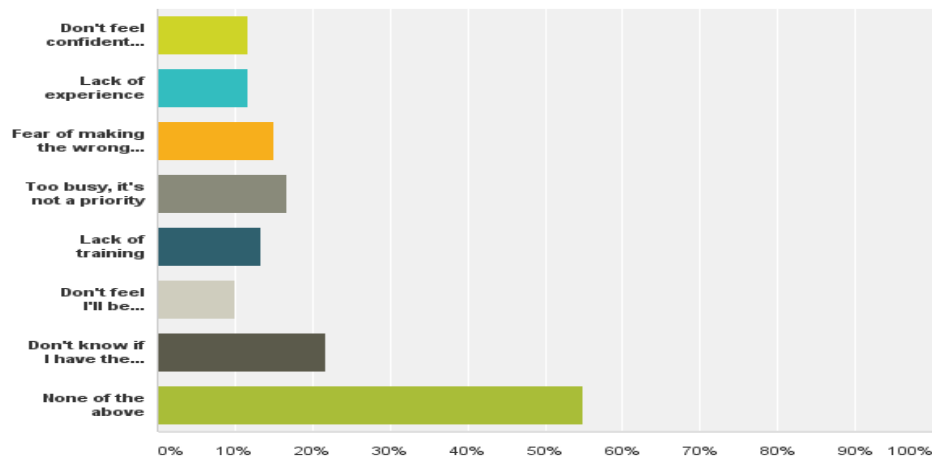
The data suggests that managers are aware of how to find policies, procedures and guidance; however, comments received suggest that policies can quickly become out of date, are too wordy and rigid, and need to be refreshed more often. Other comments suggested the addition of quick user guides including diagrams and flow charts.

Survey Part Three

The third page of the survey looked at what issues may prevent a manager from taking action at the appropriate time and gave some of the most surprising results. Whilst over half of the respondents didn't feel anything was preventing them from acting.

Q11 What, if any, of the following prevents you from taking action at the appropriate time?

Answered: 60 Skipped: 11



20% of respondents selected “Don't know if I have the authority to act” and this was consistent across both managers in HR and service delivery. The second most popular reason for not acting was “Too busy, it's not a priority”.

This demonstrates that there can be multiple issues affecting a manager's ability to act and these would need to be tackled on a number of fronts.

When asked what would support would make them better equipped to deal with people management issues 32% of respondents who provided information cited training as the additional support required. This included briefings, refresher training and practical support and e-learning could facilitate this.

The final part of the survey concentrated on what managers believed the role of HR to be now and in the future and it appears that this is where there is the greatest divide between managers in HR and service delivery managers.

The last part of this section asked whether managers have a mechanism to feed in their future HR requirements to help you meet their business needs and again there was a significant difference between managers in HR and service delivery managers.

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46 people gave their view on the role of the current HR; overwhelmingly current HR is seen as a transactional function, identified as the go to experts in people management.

When asked about the future role of HR there was a definite split. Of the 12 HR manager respondents 100% stated the role should be more strategic and enabling.

From the service delivery manager respondents only 3 out of 34 quoted strategy and enabling. The main focus for this group was to continue as is providing advice and support as required.

100% of HR manager respondents to this question stated that they have a mechanism to feed in future HR requirements whereas only 64% of service delivery manager respondents felt the same. Over one third (36%) of respondents as service delivery managers stated they either didn't have or weren't sure if they had a mechanism to feed in future HR requirements.

7. Interviews

We each spoke to an operational manager and an HR Manager in our respective organisations to ask their views. Our research has shown that there is a gap in the perspective from HR professional to that of the line manager in the future function of HR. Line managers see the function remaining a handholding support and first point of call for advice function where HR professionals suggest a drive to be more strategic.

We asked the managers "How do you think we can bridge that gap? What could we do in order to allow HR to become more strategic?"

The responses varied given where our respective organisations and HR services are in their development of the business partner model.

A common thread from the local authority perspective was that longstanding managers remember a time when HR dealt with people issues for them, they see a move away from that as a work shunt on to them. They are working with reducing resources and don't see people issues as a priority. This was also reflected in our survey results.

Another theme reflected was a lack of confidence from managers to take action for fear of the ramifications of making a mistake. An example being still wanting HR to participate on interview panels 'just in case'. Respondents felt senior managers had a role in helping managers understand their role and supporting their decisions.

Two managers interviewed felt that they wanted HR to carry on doing what they are doing in terms of providing a 'sounding board' and being the technical experts when it comes to complex issues. They felt they had autonomy and were allowed to manage risks.

The data suggests different views from managers depending on their length of time as a manager and general willingness to adapt to the changes within the whole organisation, not just HR.

From an HR managers perspective there was a feeling that moves are being made to have a more strategic role however there is an acknowledgement that HR in general need to push managers further and be braver in allowing them to evaluate the risks and make the decisions they want in relation to their people and take steps to stop holding hands and in some instances force the issues.

HR managers also felt that improved training and toolkits to support refreshed policies and procedures will help give managers the confidence they need to deal with people issues.

It was felt that communication was a big issue in building confidence. HR attendance at departmental management meetings and planning meetings would help build relationships and managers would understand HR were still there to support as changes happen. Being part of the planning process would allow HR to be more pro-active and less reactive and focus more on assisting managers forward planning their business requirements.

Overall we felt that the views received from managers during the interviews were reflective of the survey results.

8. Conclusions

This study has explored the question of whether the role of the HR function is enabling or disabling managers. Through analysing data across 3 public sector organisations, our conclusion is that HR is in a continuous cycle of change and evolution. There is clear evidence that the move is for the HR role to become increasingly strategic, but this role is not replacing traditional HR roles, rather, it is being grafted on, adding to the diversity, challenge and complexity of HR in the public sector. Our findings show that management perception of HR within the public sector has still not progressed much further as included in earlier research and literature.

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The data suggests a number of areas require further development in order to address the concerns of managers and enable them to be confident in dealing with people management issues and therefore allowing HR to develop into a more strategic role contributing to organisational success.

The process and content for training managers needs to be rejuvenated. Firstly to ensure that managers receive appropriate training, which is accessible on an ongoing basis and not 'one off'. The use of elearning modules as an accreditation for example around recruitment and selection would ensure managers were adequately trained and this could be refreshed on a regular basis i.e. every 12 months. This improvement is required to build managers' knowledge and confidence and reduce their reliance on HR for transactional services.

Managers are overwhelming telling us that they know how to access policies, procedures, templates and toolkits and in the main they are easy to follow which is half the battle. To further enable managers we need to exploit this resource to better provide what they need.

To address issues of confidence and support managers need an informal network they can tap in to as issues arise. This has to be coupled with clarification around their role in people management and the level of authority they carry as well as confidence that the organisation will support their actions.

There has to be an acknowledgement that within the public sector financial challenges have reduced staffing levels considerably and managers are facing many demands. In order for managers to give people management issues the priority it requires they need to understand the business benefits for them. Providing a simple framework for them to operate from would assist in this.

The findings highlight the parental nature of HR. It is clear from the data that service delivery managers value the support they receive from HR and see this as the role moving forward. HR must do a better job of selling the benefits of providing business partnering to convince managers that a move to a more strategic position is good for them as well as the organisation.

9. Recommendations

Training and Support

The introduction of a pre-management development process would allow budding managers to gain an understanding, and some experience, of people management issues. This could include a self-assessment and portfolio of evidence gained in each area, confirmed by their manager. This process would set out the expectations of managers and demonstrate the benefits of prioritising people management issues. It would also demonstrate to those budding managers if they were up to the job.

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Development of 'bite size' online training modules could be developed for managers to access as required, and these should be updated as policies change. Better use of elearning modules would make training far more accessible and could be programmed in at regular intervals to keep managers up to date. Using this system would allow monitoring of uptake and any areas of concern.

Rather than formal mentors experienced buddies could be identified for managers to refer to supported by HR drop in clinics on particular topics.

Policies and Procedures

The fact that managers unanimously know how to find policies and procedures and generally feel they are easy to follow is a positive which needs to be built on. Ensuring policies are up to date, changes communicated and supplemented with quick guides and flow charts will encourage managers to use them more easily before having to refer to HR.

Improving confidence

Helping build the confidence of managers could begin before they are even in post. Ensuring they are aware of the expectations of them as a manager and given experience of dealing with people management issues will help prepare them for their role ahead. This will also provide clarity around their role and levels of authority.

Selling HR

HR having a seat at the top table in the organisation is key to ensuring that the HR function is in a position to influence at the highest level and become recognised as adding true value to the business. This would demonstrate the benefits of having HR involved at a more strategic level to help managers achieve their business goals.

A two-way communication channel needs to be opened between HR and managers, visibility across the organisation helping managers see HR as accessible and approachable. An improved process for suggestions and comments to be fed in from managers could be developed on internal intranet systems which would provide a forum for feedback 'You said – we did'.

HR needs to be part of future business planning and not reactive attendance at service planning meetings would allow HR input

Acknowledging the challenge

Managers are under increasing pressure to transform services and deliver more with less. This needs to be acknowledged and changes delivered in a planned way to ensure managers understand, accept and embrace the changes. This cannot be delivered overnight and managers will need support to get to the future state.

So HR enabling or disabling?

In true HR fashion the answer is both! We have not provided a full suite of knowledge and tools that managers need to progress at an operational level but this can only be done with buy in from the most senior managers. A re-education of managers' on the whole organisational transformation which needs to take place in the public sector and the role that HR plays in that is an ongoing challenge.

Only when we have truly enabled managers to manage their people efficiently and with confidence will HR create the capacity to work more as a Business Partner and contribute to improving business performance.

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Action Plan

Appendix A

Key Finding	Proposed Action
Training	
22% of Managers have not received any training in People Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set out a training plan for managers • Introduce a monitoring system to ensure training takes place
15% of those managers who have been trained say training did not meet their needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce 'bite size' refresher training • Evaluate training regularly to ensure needs are being met
Policies and Procedures	
Comments from respondents suggest improvements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure policies are up to date • Keep policies succinct • Communicate policy changes
Preventing Action being taken	
20% of managers did not know if they have the authority to act	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly define a 'Manager' role and responsibility • Pre-management programme setting out expectations
32% of managers stated training as the additional support they needed to take action	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider shortened managers guidance • Introduce flowcharts or quick user guides

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The Future of HR	
<p>36% of operational managers didn't feel they had a mechanism to feed in their future HR requirements</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Open two way communication channels with services • Be visible to operational managers, spend time to understand their business • HR needs to be part of future business planning and not reactive, attendance at service planning meetings would allow HR input
<p>Managers not accepting HR as significant contributors to business</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR needs a seat at the top table to demonstrate the value in business improvement • HR need to build their reputation through development of knowledge and professional skills focussed on business critical elements.
<p>100% of HR Managers see the future of HR as more strategic</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • HR need to build confidence and ability in managers to allow the space to become more involved in strategic priorities