

The sophistication of human resources: the learning leader's challenge

The human resources development function has enjoyed something of a "golden age" over the past decade. But, say Annie McKee and Stanton Wortham, we must work hard to maintain it

Over the past ten years we have seen a substantial and welcome change in the human resources (HR) function in both the private and public sectors. The function has come of age.

We are in a much better place now when it comes to the people side of organisational development. But we are not done yet. The sophistication of HR could be just an accident of timing. The sheer numbers of talented (and ageing) baby boomers in many large, Western organisations at the moment means that we have experienced people in many top jobs, including those in a particular area of human resources — learning and leadership development.

And these individuals have been educated, certified and otherwise trained in all things related to people and organisations, like their peers in other parts of the corporate world. They have MBAs, executive coaching certifications, degrees in organisational development and even executive doctorates — such as the one offered by the University of Pennsylvania, which position them to be Chief Learning Officers in the C-suite.

But what happens when these individuals leave their jobs, as they inevitably will? What must we do to make sure that this trend toward sophisticated learning and leadership development professionals continues?

The answer to these questions starts with a mandate: we need to act *now*.

As a result of the (busy) bubble of the early 2000s and the massive cutbacks that followed the economic crisis, organisations have drastically reined in on developing their people, including the people responsible for managing learning architectures



and conducting learning programmes. Training programmes have dried up and the better, more innovative leadership development programmes have been watered down. Coaching is still offered by many organisations and may even be on the rise — but it's usually reserved for top business leaders not the people in charge of the learning function.

Paradoxically, development has been cut just when leaders need it most. The world has changed dramatically and the pressure to lead in new ways is intense. Technology, globalisation, shifts in the balance of world economic power and rapidly changing demographics affect virtually every aspect of HR. It is crucial that all of us learn to lead in this new world.

So, as a talented HR leader, what can you do to lead effectively in the 21st century? We have looked at two ways you can ensure your personal effectiveness. First, you need to develop your technical HR skills. Second, you need to develop your leadership skills — particularly your emotional intelligence. Let us look at each of these in turn.

Develop technical learning and leadership development skills

Learning and leadership development professionals usually reside in the human resources function. More recently, these jobs are often tied to talent management (a term used more and more

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frequently to describe a host of HR responsibilities). And, despite rapid changes in the workplace over recent years, certain HR and talent management activities remain constant. These include creating processes that enable the business to identify, recruit and orient new employees, manage performance, and compensation.

Wherever you “sit” in the HR or talent management function, you need to understand how to manage the size and shape of your workforce to fit the strategy and design of your organisation. You need to understand how to support your organisation’s leaders in dealing with people issues of all sorts—including the complicated issues around a global and culturally diverse workforce.

The old fashioned “HR Cycle” depicted in Figure 1, is still relevant, and as a learning and leadership development specialist, you need to understand how all of these areas fit within or alongside your arena. In short, none of these jobs/functions are stand alone, and it’s not enough to say “I’m in learning, you all handle the rest.”

Taking an integrated and strategic approach to the HR function is critically important today. The reason: While what HR managers do in some arenas remains constant how you engage employees in all aspects of the HR cycle has changed substantially in recent years.

The changes are the result of rapidly changing organisational landscapes: the move to outsource technical HR jobs, globalisation, the swing from centralization to regionalisation and back again, and new and ever-changing technologies means that all HR professionals have to stay on top of their games.

This is particularly true for learning and leadership development professionals. Whatever technologies you have access to, and however your area is structured, you still need to ensure that basic and sophisticated learning activities get done well. People in your organisation need to learn, develop, change and keep up with a fast-changing world, partly as a result of your efforts. Nothing will discredit you faster than not providing basic services to the people and managers in your organisation.

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Become a leader in your own right

The technical competencies discussed so far are basic: they enable you to be accepted as a competent professional by your line manager peers. But, as in any profession, threshold competencies are necessary but not sufficient. To become an exemplary learning and development professional you need to be a leader. But what, exactly, do you need to develop?

Our research indicates that today's leaders must develop several key cognitive and emotional competencies in order to be effective.

For example, in this rapidly changing world, you need to hone a competency we call "pattern recognition". As our colleague Richard Boyatzis points out in his work, pattern recognition enables you to see order in chaos. Pattern recognition enables an HR leader to read trends that affect people in the organisation. It enables you to see things like the impact of strategy on people, general management development needs, and demographic changes in the employee base. These cognitive competencies are part of being a smart learning and development leader.

As important as they are, however, being smart in the traditional sense is not enough when it comes to leadership. Research indicates that the competencies that differentiate outstanding leaders are related to emotional intelligence (EI). In our work, we look at EI competencies related to self-awareness, self-management, social awareness and relationship management, as seen in Figure 2.

The research on EI is conclusive: these competencies differentiate outstanding leaders from average ones. Let us look at five competencies that are particularly important for HR leaders, and learning and development professionals in particular: adaptability, empathy, organisational awareness, self-awareness and emotional self-control.

FIGURE 1:
THE HR CYCLE

For more on HR management, see Annie McKee, *Management: A Focus on Leaders*. Pearson, 2014

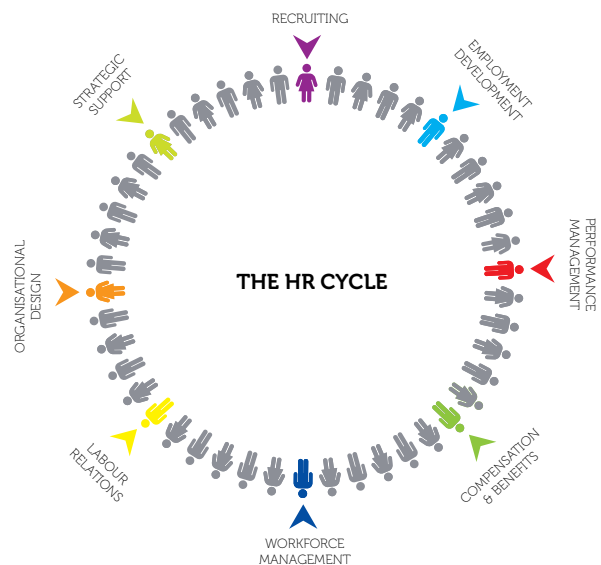
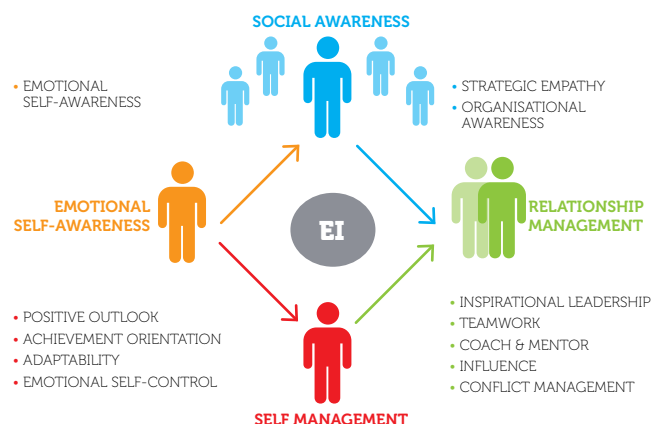


FIGURE 2:
EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

For more on emotional intelligence, see Annie McKee, Richard Boyatzis and Frances Johnston, *Becoming a Resonant Leader*. Harvard Business Press, 2008



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Adaptability is obviously necessary in our world today. Change is constant and often dramatic. For example, HR leaders must adapt all basic technical processes to changes such as the movement from hierarchical to matrix organisations and back again, the swing between centralised and decentralised service provision and/or from shared services to service provision in the business, and the constant evolution of technologies that affect the entire HR cycle. For learning and leadership development specialists, this competency is extremely important as we try to understand how to manage the balance among face-to-face, blended, and online learning. The rapid and somewhat trendy move to MOOCs is powerful; if you don't truly understand how to adapt learning best practices to a variety of contexts, you could find yourself jumping on a trend rather than skillfully navigating your changing environment

Empathy is the ability to read accurately the needs, motivations and desires of other people. This competency is at the core of the HR leader's job, for what is more basic than understanding what our internal clients need? For the learning and development professional, this competency is doubly important for at least two reasons. First, the empathy competency enables you to understand how people will respond to your learning programmes. Will they resist? Will they get bored? Or, will they be enthusiastic co-creators of a learning experience that lasts? Anticipating individuals' reactions to your programmes is key to the design and implementation of programmes that work.

Organisational awareness is the ability to grasp organisational climate and mood — what we call the emotional reality of an organisation. Because feelings matter at work, and because they affect our capacity to think and behave, HR leaders need to understand the emotional reality of their organisations and know how to move the mood toward excitement, appropriate challenge and optimism. Once again, when it comes to the learning function, this is key. The competent learning professional understands how to read organisational trends (and then knows how to translate these trends into powerful, positive learning programmes).

Self-awareness and emotional self-control are essential for success as a leader. Research indicates that understanding one's own emotions and how they affect thoughts and behaviour is essential for working in complex organisations. Work today is stressful and all leaders must navigate constant changes, political pressures and overwork (what we call the Sacrifice Syndrome).

If you do not understand your emotional responses to stress, you are lost before you begin. On the plus side, if you know how to kindle your own optimism, find joy in daily "wins" and build relationships that feed your soul, you will find that you can shine as a leader. The interplay between self-awareness and emotional self-control is evident in these examples — one comes before the other but both are necessary for leadership success. An added and often missed benefit of mastering one's emotions is that your feelings become the source of others' enthusiasm, optimism, and commitment. That's because emotions are contagious!

As a successful learning leader today you have many opportunities to shape yourself as a leader in your own right. Your organisation's leaders need you. And they need you to be more than a partner. They need you to lead. As you chart a course for your own development, then, start with the ambition to lead.