

REFRAMING THE HR AGENDA

In conversation with Nishi Vasudeva, Former Chairman of HPCL

CHROs today need to think more like business people than as functional experts. Framing effective HR programmes and policies itself requires a deep, ground-level understanding of the business. Further, CHROs need to be a good sounding board for the CEO, and to help break down siloes – such as by setting the right KRAs, and adopting a balanced scorecard approach. Their strong awareness and knowledge of ‘people dynamics’ allows them to offer valuable inputs to the CEO in terms of placing people in critical positions, and aiding leadership development.

Passion, ownership and drive brings out the best in people

THE CRITICALITY OF TEAMWORK

At HPCL, Ms Vasudeva moved out of her original area of expertise – marketing – to head an ERP project that brought together 150 consultants and the best talent from IT. From operating out of a bungalow-turned-office to implementing an open-office layout (which was unheard-of in the public sector in those days), she faced many challenges in the initial phase of the project. However, the passion, ownership and drive with which her team stepped up to meet their deadlines – they even voluntarily decided to work 6 days a week – ensured success.

Cross-functional teamwork, and true business partnering

Since the project had to be implemented at multiple locations, the teams were constantly changing. In the transitional phase, the project team brought in its own HR practices, including monthly appraisals. Numerous discussions and deliberations on integrating organisation-wide systems helped them become better negotiators, and to gain a broader perspective that went beyond a narrower ‘You vs Me’ view. Many had to be away from their families for 12-18 months, but what kept them going, more than monetary rewards, were the smaller things – such as getting their pictures clicked with their seniors at Go-Live events. The project’s success led to creation of a separate, rotation-based functional/technical group, the ‘Information Services Department.’ Being better placed to understand and service the business’s requirements, members of this department became business partners in the truest sense

Seeking leadership at various levels, such as by tapping into people’s thoughts

REDEFINING LEADERSHIP

Leadership is defined not by the position one occupies, but by the way one operates – including the willingness to take on challenges. CHROs can help mould leaders at various levels by making line managers believe that they are valuable to the company. HR Heads might also look to promote ideas like ‘leadership conversations’, which are short talks with employees to gauge their views on the company, their expectations/aspirations, and how would they like to take the business forward. Such conversations often reveal much about a person’s potential – and it reduces the risk of functional heads pushing their own favoured candidates up the ranks.

THE NEW CHRO MANDATE: BECOMING A BUSINESS DRIVER

In conversation with Pramod Bhasin, Chairman, Clix Capital

The CHRO's role has expanded beyond its traditional scope encompassing recruitment and payroll. In successful organisations, CHROs provide guidance on the overall strategic direction, from talent acquisition and performance management to compensation, growth planning and so much more. In addition, CHROs are expected to stay abreast with a constantly-changing business landscape, lead the adoption of all things digital, and strategise in advance of emerging trends in leadership skills and talent management.

Shifting demographics, technology and new skill-sets

THE BIG SHIFTS IMPACTING COMPANIES

Businesses are evolving not just in terms of the way they work, but with whom and for whom, across a variety of platforms, time zones and cultures. The biggest shifts, though, are in the realm of workforce demographics: organisations are hiring younger, multi-generational, multi-cultural and remote or gig workers. At the same time, digitisation and technologies such as analytics and IOT, are pushing up worker productivity. At a broader level, the attributes and skill-sets that employers seek goes beyond experience and technical competence. It is the 'softer' skills – emotional intelligence, empathy, risk-taking, wisdom, fairness, common sense and character – that matter more. For their part, organisations need to remain flexible and imbibe a commitment and culture that differentiates itself through shared values and a strong mission and vision.

Companies must embrace agility...

THE ART OF BUSINESS-BUILDING

India is today the world's third-largest base for start-ups, after the US and the UK. Yet, whether a company is regarded as 'emerged', 'emerging' or 're-discovering', the common goal should be to shift focus from *scale* to *intimacy*, from *routine* to *disruption*, and from *delivery* to *development*. To enable this, CHROs must exhibit business acumen and transform traditional HR practices into competitive advantages. The imperative is to design more flexible business models, nurture diverse teams, partner with other companies and competitors to build speed and learning, innovate through 'fail-fast' experimentation, and promote curiosity, collaboration and change.

..but this calls for re-evaluating the role of HR, from governance to guidance

This is a challenging task, requiring CHROs to upgrade their skill-sets and adopt a new approach. Moving away from managing people or petty problems like office politics, they must focus on talent strategies and transformations that meet business requirements. They must also be able to anticipate threats and opportunities, create an agile and future-ready workforce that is capable of taking calculated risks and drive a high-performance culture in a global, multi-generational and diverse workforce.

Moving from agenda to implementation

SOLVING FOR THE PROBLEM OF PEOPLE MANAGEMENT

Every HR manager would agree that leadership development and hiring great people are at the top of their agenda. However, most organisations fail to implement, or at least to properly execute, an

GREAT EXPECTATIONS: A CEO-CHRO SAGA

In conversation with Sudhir Shenoy, CEO, Dow India

From their earlier, more siloed and ‘manufacturing-like’ structures, organisations are moving towards a more collaborative approach – one built around business partnering. The two functions that have evolved the most in recent decades are Finance and HR: Chief Accountants have transformed into CFOs and Personnel Managers into CHROs. Nowadays, CHROs not only occupy an important position on the executive team but in many cases have also earned a seat at the Board. Moreover, CEOs and CHROs have become increasingly interdependent on each other in managing the two biggest assets of a company: employees and customer relations. However, compared to CFOs – who can bank on a variety of internal and external support structures in terms of reporting and compliance – CHROs have no real measurable metrics or compliance norms to serve as guidelines. Arguably, therefore, they face a more difficult challenge when it comes to balancing their twin roles: staying true to the organisation’s purpose and challenging the status quo, all while partnering closely with the CEO.

Sustainability and resource scarcity are the new reality...

...and technological change is changing the work environment

CHROs need to share symbiotic relations with CEOs...

...act as a trusted business advisor...

SHIFTING BUSINESS IMPERATIVES...

A transforming business environment has profound implications not just for the CHRO’s role, but also for the CHRO-CEO partnership. At the macro level, firms must contend with issues around sustainability and resource scarcity. In emerging markets like India, there are additional stresses around inequality and job losses, both of which are linked to social unrest. Technologies such as AI, machine learning and data analytics are also bringing sweeping change, and specific to the HR domain, the future will be about virtual collaborative work spaces, flexible work arrangements and hot-desking. A range of tasks will get automated, and robots will replace humans in many roles. Product life-cycles are also shortening, and more and more workers are moving towards the gig economy.

MULTIPLE AREAS OF COLLABORATION

In this environment, CEOs and CHROs must work together to make the organisation agile and adaptable. They need to prepare for longer-term shifts while also focusing on the short-term, including acquiring and grooming the right talent. Given that functional expertise can only take you so far, HR leaders must truly understand what business the organisation is in, and they must have the breadth to think both strategically and long-term. At another level, they can play a role in deepening the engagement with customers. Sales teams tend to be fairly transactional in their approach to clients, but when HR steps in, it can share experiences and best practices with the client, bringing a new facet to the relationship.

Earning a seat at the Board level can help CHROs drill home the point that human capital is what enables a business to fulfil its longer-term vision and goals. To get there, CHROs must go beyond just overseeing a narrowly-defined functional domain, and become business leaders in the broadest sense. They must be the voice of employees at the leadership table, but the voice of the organisation