

Strategic People Management

A brief overview

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Many people fear, with the increasingly fast technological innovation people become less important for businesses. However, if we take a more careful look at the phenomenon, we can conclude that in reality, the opposite is happening. With the emergence of the knowledge economy¹ highly skilled people become invaluable assets firms regularly fight for.² As studies indicate, organizations with a strong culture and high employee commitment greatly outperform their competitors.³ In highly volatile business environments high-performing groups can be our greatest asset. In this context, good human resource management is more crucial than ever before.

Today we are experiencing multiple changes in economical, political, social, cultural business environments. These changes have a huge effect on healthcare.⁴ ⁵ These include changes in the age structure of the population,⁶ the emergence of ageing societies,⁷ ⁸ just to mention a few. Particularly in western countries societies, people are living longer, which increases the demand for healthcare services.⁹ ¹⁰

Many scholars realize, with the accelerating wealth gap¹¹ high-quality healthcare becomes less and less affordable for an increasing portion of the population. Clayton Christensen in his insightful book made a similar observation.¹² He argues, today more and more people find themselves unable to access even basic healthcare services. This trend can be observed not just in developing countries, but in western nations as well. Perhaps today's greatest challenge is making healthcare affordable. In terms of *accessibility* to healthcare, there is also room for improvement.¹³ ¹⁴

These economic, political, socio-cultural, environmental, political-legal changes put enormous pressure on health services.¹⁵ This can be directly translated into greater pressure on

healthcare management and challenges in healthcare delivery as well. In this turbulent environment, the role of human resources has become even more crucial. Regardless of how developed our technology is, healthcare organizations rely heavily on the power of people. If organizations want to stay competitive in this turbulent environment they need to put special emphasis on strategic human resource management.¹⁶

When it comes to people, everything starts with the right recruitment process. The right staffing process has four major steps.¹⁷ First, we need to develop a staffing plan, then develop policies that encourage fairness, diversity and a multicultural environment. Then comes the recruitment process, and finally selecting the right employees. I will explain these steps in detail below.

If we approach human resource planning from a strategic perspective we should take into consideration the long-term implications of our actions. We could start the process by assessing the current state of the organizations. Being familiar with present circumstances involves knowing our people. We could build a *skills inventory* of employees to make sure we know what is the future potential of our existing workforce.¹⁸ As a second step, we could forecast the future HR requirement of the firm. By assessing the strategic goals of the organization, the first thing to consider is the future labour requirement of the company. Then forecasting labour availability in the future we could determine the *gap* between our labour needs and the possible labour availability. Then we could develop an effective action plan to eliminate the gap between the two states.¹⁹ We should consider building a plan for two possible future scenarios. We have to anticipate situations of labour surplus and labour shortages. When dealing with labour surpluses, we can modify our recruiting strategy, freeze hiring for a certain period, and transfer the workforce into other departments of the organizations that are currently facing shortages. We could also reduce work time by discouraging people from working extra hours and eliminating part-time shifts. In case of dealing with employee shortages, we could consider new hires, transferring the workforce, training people, and encouraging working overtime.²⁰ However, decision-making experts John S. Hammond, Ralph L. Keeney and Howard Raiffa argue, executives often fail to consider the secondary consequences behind their actions.²¹ By considering as many interrelated factors and possible outcomes of these actions as possible, we can make higher quality decisions. For example, the way executives choose their HR strategies and actions can directly affect employee morale and ultimately the bottom line. The goal of the HR planning process is to develop as many scenarios for unforeseen events as possible.²² This way we can mitigate the risk and uncertainty involved in every strategic decision.²³

Diversity is not just hiring people of colour. But making decision-making processes based on inclusiveness.²⁴ Giving actual decision-making power into the hands of a diverse group of employees can be a much better way of building a diverse organization. Furthermore, inviting a diverse group of people into actual decision-making processes greatly enhances the quality of decisions organizations make. Diversity and inclusion are beneficial not just for the individual employees, but also for the organization as a whole. As an example, by building an inclusive organization and giving real decision-making power to frontline employees, Ray Dalio has built one of the most outstanding organizational cultures existing today.²⁵ At Bridgewater Associates with the power of many diverse perspectives the organization was able to predict economical changes much faster and more accurately than any of their competitors.

Raafi-Karim Alidina and Stephen Frost argue, in today's highly turbulent, volatile and competitive business environment, leaders should treat the lack of diversity as a crisis of organizational culture.²⁶ They define diversity as the attitude of engaging with different perspectives.

Scholars argue, today the world is becoming more and more polarized.²⁷ People tend to support opinions, ideas and initiatives that are similar to theirs.²⁸ *Confirmation bias* has its implications for business as well.²⁹ It can lead to a widely researched decision-making failure, called *groupthink*.³⁰ It can be costly if the main decision-makers in an organization are people with a similar background, education, opinion who think similarly and view the world the same way. Too much consensus can be as bad as unnecessary conflict. If we examine a problem from just one single perspective we will likely have blind spots about particular aspects of the problem we are dealing with.³¹ Building an inclusive culture has basically no material cost but the benefits can be significant. Making sure we see a particular problem from many different angles and perspectives can greatly enhance the quality of our decisions.³²

People can make intuitive judgments about other people and situations in a blink of an eye. Researchers call this *snap-judgement*.³³ It is a widely researched phenomenon that got increased attention during the last few decades. It is our responsibility to be aware of these cultural, political, social and personal biases. Bringing it to a conscious level can greatly help reduce prejudice and discrimination. None of us can act independently from our unconsciously held attitudes and beliefs. However, what we do, what decision we make and what action we take consciously is always in our control.³⁴ There are a few useful approaches that can help us adopt a more inclusive mindset on a personal and organizational level as well. The first thing is *acceptance*.³⁵ Accepting other people with other opinions and points of view, other beliefs,

values and assumptions can be the first step. Acceptance doesn't necessarily mean agreement. We can disagree with someone on an intellectual level and still accept the validity of his or her perspective. Patrick Lencioni calls this *intellectual debate*.³⁶ He argues, we have to separate the person from the idea while engaging in an intellectual, *productive conflict*.

In the second stage, we can move our actions to the conscious level.³⁷ We have to start consciously examining and disproving our harmful beliefs and assumptions. If we act in an empathetic and inclusive way these attitudes become our second nature over time. At this point, we have already moved to the final stage of inclusiveness, when we can take control of our actions based on our internalised prejudices.

As we have seen, inclusion is about action. Learning experts argue when people try to change a fundamental part of what they are and what they believe in, learning by action is the best way.³⁸ It takes significant effort and a considerable amount of time but the benefits are worth the effort. Organizational culture expert Edgar Schein observed that the most fundamental factor that influences people's behaviour in organizational settings is the commonly held beliefs and underlying assumptions.³⁹ He argues employees are not always able to articulate why they are doing a particular action. They learn mainly by observing leaders and other members of the organization and by trying to imitate the observed behaviour. He calls this the transfer of *tacit knowledge*.^{40 41} It is the world of unspoken rules, unconscious behaviours and actions that cannot be understood just by "following written rules."⁴² Schein warns us, very often there are discrepancies between the formal requirements of the organization and the actions of leaders and employees in certain situations. This gap between the "spoken" and "unspoken" world can be a source of many mistakes, failures, wrong practices and even disasters and business failures.⁴³ This can have serious implications in terms of diversity and inclusion as well. Therefore, awareness is key. It is important to build a culture of openness based on open communication and transparency.⁴⁴ Understanding people's reasons behind their actions can be a good starting point.⁴⁵ Building processes and systems can be a better way of building a coherent and inclusive culture.⁴⁶

We can say, diversity should not be just an item on a checklist, not just a feature of organizational design, but an active attitude. By designing effective interventions based on inclusiveness, we can attack concrete and practical problems. Leadership can have perhaps the greatest influence on organizational culture. The quickest way to see real changes within an organization is by training leaders and embedding an inclusive mindset within higher levels of the organization.⁴⁷ Adopting new hiring practices and improving communication among employees can also be an important leverage point for building a diverse workplace. By

building a culture based on open communication we can have direct information about what people do, feel, what they believe, how they behave, what they fear and what they expect.⁴⁸ After we built a culture based on psychological safety and open communication we can focus on the details and particular actions as well. For example, we, as employers have to make sure we eliminate unlawful discrimination of any kind at work.⁴⁹ We also have to comply with certain laws and regulations regarding inclusion and discrimination.⁵⁰ We have to design different HR processes in the spirit of equality, fairness and freedom for opportunities for everyone.⁵¹ A few crucial areas in this regard are: constructing job adverts and applications, conducting interviews, recruiting people with any kind of disability.⁵² We also need to design physical spaces that are accessible for disabled people and have to provide certain auxiliary services for those who need them. Also, we need to make sure disabled people will not be at a *substantial disadvantage*, compared with people who are not disabled in terms of provision, criterion or practice of their employer.⁵³ If we can systematically teach skills of inclusiveness throughout the organization we can scale the attitude of acceptance and inclusiveness. This way we can build a resilient organizational culture based on equality, fairness and inclusion.

The great management guru, Peter Drucker argues, the greatest shift in today's economic environment came with the emergence of knowledge work.⁵⁴ Richard Florida in his insightful book argues the *creative class* reshaping today's economy, geography, and workplace practices at once.⁵⁵ Knowledge workers determine which companies prosper or go bankrupt, and even which cities thrive. Today providing the right training and growth opportunities for employees has become not just an extra benefit, but a requirement.

Many management researchers observed, today's knowledge workers don't consider money and stable employment conditions the most important deciding factor when choosing between employers. The main differentiating factor has become personal growth and opportunities for future development as well as autonomy, a sense of purpose and work that is personally meaningful for them.⁵⁶ In other words, employees want a richer life. Not just in terms of money, but also in terms of being intellectually challenged, having a significant goal to work towards, being valued and appreciated and having a healthy work-life balance.⁵⁷

Geert Hofstede, one of the most influential thinkers in cross-cultural psychology argues, the factors that distinguish different cultures are *values, rituals, heroes, symbols and practices*.⁵⁸ These differences can have a concrete impact on the organizational culture. For example, in times of crisis, when people are under pressure and have to make very quick decisions, they tend to fall back on their default way of dealing with problems.⁵⁹ People from

different cultural backgrounds can have very different ways of thinking, problem-solving and decision making. These different perspectives can be highly beneficial for the organization.⁶⁰ Those companies who allow expressing different ideas and make their decisions considering different perspectives of the problem are more innovative, according to Wharton Business School professor, Adam Grant.⁶¹ However, in times of crisis and disruption organizations need a coherent way of addressing problems and reacting to challenges systematically.⁶² We can build a more homogeneous workplace by providing adequate training and development opportunities for every employee.

Researchers from the University of California Berkeley studied the "*founding blueprint*" and hiring practices of 200 Silicon Valley startup companies.⁶³ They identified 5 different funding models based on the founding and hiring practices of companies they have examined. The five "blueprints" are: *Star Model* (hiring the brightest people); *Professional Model* (building teams around specific skill sets), *Commitment Model* (reliance on emotional or familial ties of employees to the organization, selection based on cultural fit, and peer-group control); *Bureaucracy* (selecting individuals based on their qualifications for a particular role and formalized control); *Autocracy* (employment premised on monetary motivations, employees to perform pre-specified tasks). They found that the commitment model consistently led to the highest rates of success; the survival rate was the highest during and after the tech bubble in the early 2000s. Companies built around the commitment achieved initial public offering 3 times more often than companies with any other type of founding blueprint. These and similar studies suggest the importance of considering cultural fit while selecting employees.⁶⁴

Today's business environment and business processes become more and more complex, interrelated and interconnected. As complexity grows creating an organizational culture becomes increasingly important.⁶⁵ Leaders can't be everywhere, can't solve every business-related problem on their own. With technological innovation, it becomes increasingly difficult to understand highly task-related activities in detail. Leaders need to delegate and empower people to make independent decisions, taking full responsibility for their actions.⁶⁶ Therefore, people-related skills become more and more important for leaders. Daniel Goleman, the pioneer of the concept of emotional intelligence argues, technical skills become less and less important as leaders progress towards higher leadership positions.⁶⁷ Social intelligence and people related skills become the most important skills of an effective leader.⁶⁸

It could be beneficial to consider using different personality assessment tools during the hiring process to achieve the best possible *employee-culture fit*.⁶⁹ There are plenty of

possible solutions that can help assess new hires and also existing members of the organization. The most widely used personality assessment tool is the *MBTI (Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator)*. It was developed in the 1940s by Katharine Cook Briggs and her daughter, Isabel Briggs Myers.⁷⁰ The model is based on Carl G. Jung's work with the title *Psychological Types*,⁷¹ that was published in 1921. The instrument grew in popularity and gained wide acceptance since its inception. The tool is used by most of the Fortune 500 companies and also millions of businesses of different sizes from all around the world.⁷² The tool categorizes personality types into 16 different subtypes.⁷³ It is organized around four key dimensions, each of these dimensions having two distinct variables. These dimensions are: *I/E (Introversion and Extraversion)*; *N/S (Intuition and Sensing)*; *T/P (Thinking and Feeling)* and finally *J/P (Judging and Perceptive)*. This tool could be very useful to find the right place for the right employee. Jim Collins expressed this idea creatively in his famous "bus metaphor".⁷⁴ He said, we have to get the right people on the bus, then make sure the right people are sitting in the right seats before figuring out where to drive the bus.

After we have the *right people in the right seats* we have to make sure the organization is capable of reaching its destination and goals. Having an engaged and motivated workforce can make the difference between organizational success and failure.⁷⁵ Today's managers need to be skilled communicators.⁷⁶ They also need to be knowledgeable about how to encourage people to do extraordinary things. Building high performing teams, managing conflict and helping people reach their full potential is also considered essential for a good manager.⁷⁷ I will suggest using several science-based and widely researched tools and practices below.

Motivational theorists may have different opinions regarding many aspects of employee motivation. However, most contemporary theorists agree on one key point: money and monetary incentives are considered less important in motivating people. This finding gained increasing acceptance since the middle of the last century.⁷⁸ One of the earliest researchers who discovered the different effects of *extrinsic* and *intrinsic* motivators was the famous American psychologist Harry Harlow.⁷⁹ This idea was popularized most recently in Daniel Pink's bestselling book, *Drive*.⁸⁰ It is also acknowledged by eminent behavioural economist Dan Ariely in his 2016 book about the same phenomenon.⁸¹

As Victor Frankl discovered, having a sense of purpose in life can make the difference even between life and death.⁸² Having something to thrive for, something bigger than ourselves can have a huge impact on our motivation and life satisfaction. Some scholars call it "*transcendent*" goals.⁸³ It means a goal higher than the individual him- or herself, something that *transcends* the boundaries of the self. One of the greatest thinkers of motivational

psychology, Abraham Maslow also reached similar conclusions. In the 1950s he developed *Theory X* and *Theory Y*,⁸⁴ which is a motivational theory applied to work settings. He classified managers into two groups based on their two different approaches to people. Managers who follow *Theory X* think that people are inherently lazy, dislike work, have little ambition, and avoid taking responsibility as much as possible. To motivate them managers have to take a "carrot and stick" approach based mainly on extrinsic motivating factors.⁸⁵ Followers of *Theory Y*⁸⁶ think that people enjoy work, they are self-motivated, they want to collaborate and have a good relationship with others in the organization to create something meaningful and valuable. These theories can have direct implications for organizational structure, employee promotion, recognition and the overall health of the organization. Maslow also developed a *Theory Z*,⁸⁷ which refers to a state of having a strong sense of purpose. In this case, people are thriving towards a *transcendent* goal, something bigger and more meaningful than their individual aspirations.

Perhaps the greatest way of contributing to employee wellbeing and satisfaction is recognizing people. Most of the managers and executives think they are doing a really good job in appreciating employees. However, studies suggest the opposite. Carolyn Wiley of Roosevelt University analysed 40 years of motivational surveys conducted by a large number of companies. She summarized her findings this way: "*Most employers think they know how to express appreciation for a job well done. Yet, research shows that employers seldom acknowledge appreciation for employees' work; and, when they do, it is done poorly. More than 80 percent of supervisors claim they frequently express appreciation to their subordinates, while less than 20 per cent of the employees report that their supervisors express appreciation more than occasionally.*"⁸⁸

In their insightful book, Harvard psychologists, Chip and Dan Heath suggest a powerful way of expressing appreciation to employees.⁸⁹ They argue, "*recognition should be personal, not programmatic*". They also suggest replacing the annual performance review cycle with several, small moments of recognition. It is a much better approach to give people more immediate feedback about their performance and opportunities for improvement. Appreciating people's hard work and commitment toward the organization regularly can have an enormous impact on their motivation and overall sense of wellbeing.

In conclusion, we can say, nowadays, one of the most important jobs of great leaders and managers is dealing with people. Understanding people, effectively communicating with

them requires a more human-centred approach to management. As complexity grows, engaging a diverse group of people into the decision-making processes of the organization can be our greatest strategic advantage. However, without coherent high-performing teams, and alignment between different members, parts and functions of the business we are unable to focus on what matters most.⁹⁰ That's why effectively managing people is increasingly important for organizations in today's uncertain world. Our ultimate goal is to enable people to make extraordinary things happen.

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