

The Price of Greatness is Responsibility

Over the years, the thought has often crossed my mind that although we take ourselves and what we do seriously as human resource practitioners (i.e., we keep practicing...) we rarely make the slightest difference to those organizations we work with.

Tom Peters warns folks to keep away from Personnel departments if they want to get results and all too often the Department is seen as just another part of the immovable bureaucracy. Our HR Departments too often become giant word-processing outfits where the clients - internal, external and often forgotten, take a back seat. What happened to those keen, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed HR types? Did they all go to work somewhere else or did they succumb to a sense of futility after a couple of years?

It is important for us as individuals to feel that we do make a difference and that the organizations we work with will benefit positively from our influence on them. Over the last four years I have taken a very active role in the planning of the program for the Spring Conferences in Whistler. Each year we agonize over making the next Conference better than the previous one. We try to ensure the content is relevant, practical and interesting. Often at the end of each conference we think that it was the best ever. We return from Whistler dropping buzz words and expect our clients to listen and hear us. Meanwhile people didn't get paid on Friday and the shop steward wants an urgent meeting with you. This is what it's REALLY all about isn't it? React, react, react...

'How come so many of us seem to be sunk in the mud...'

Are we condemned not to take an active role? Does bureaucracy create this or do we create it? We invent paper-systems in the name of efficiency that boggle the mind. How many different forms are you using in your HR Departments to look after "humans"? There's probably one to put a person on the payroll, one to take them off, one to record holidays, another

for sick leave, one to enrol in benefits, one to apply for a reclassification, one to make a suggestion, one to...

Taking responsibility for more than continuing this process takes courage and most importantly a serious look at what is our purpose within the organization. Which came first, the need for us or did we create and perpetuate that need with our systems and procedures? Some organizations manage well without a formal HR function. They believe that each individual manager is a human resource person. Others disagree and as they start on the path of formalizing what they do; guess what - we appear, armed with our rules and regulations and all the reasons you can't do something.

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Philosophers tell us we only need one stone thrown into the pond to make many ripples. How come so many of us seem to be sunk in the mud at the bottom - not you or me, of course! How can we utilize Habit #1 in the Seven Habits of Highly Effective People and be proactive? How are we to achieve greatness and "Leave a Legacy" of a positive variety?

Let's leave aside the "trendy" stuff and get back to basics. We have been bombarded with "e" words in the last few years, you know the ones: excellence, empowerment, equality, equity, and the environment - to say nothing (very positive) about education and even a triple E senate. Now we are into self-managing teams, gain-sharing and the learning organization. It really doesn't make any difference in the long run. What goes around comes around. Take a moment and revisit Theory X and Y - you may be surprised what little distance we have travelled along the Y road in the past 30 years. Douglas McGregor must be disappointed with us, but maybe not. Responsibility for making that difference rests with each of us taking that responsibility.

Organizations are changing and HR must change too. We need to pay attention to what's coming rather than hanging on to what has been. It's become easy for us to sit back and feel secure in the systems we have built up to barricade our departments against the onslaught of the enemy - are we effective and influential? I doubt it. We need to learn to welcome risk, learn from our mistakes - not hide behind layers of paper; express our passion for our roles and accept the ambiguity of the whole thing. Start with changing our "efficient" systems into "effective" ones and then concentrate on stepping out and being an active part of our organization's transformation. Sure, you say, but how do we do that?

We can start by doing a critical appraisal of our ability to communicate effectively. This means asking others how they think we're doing. Critics of our Conference and General Meetings refer to us as "cliquey". If we appear like that to our "inside colleagues" is there any likelihood of our communicating effectively with our client-base or maybe, even more importantly, the people we live with? As Wayne and Garth would say - NOT!

If the price of greatness is responsibility then what is each of us going to do about it? As the people who are supposed to be the leaders in the human resources area, are we here because we need to teach what we need to learn, or can we teach what we need to teach? If you accept the first part of this, then the teachers are somewhere else in the organization, maybe we could start by asking for some guidance from them. If you favour our being the teachers, guides, etc. then let's remember that teaching is a cooperative process, not top-down. Forget those old methods of schooling we grew up with and work with your organization to develop the people so that you all have a share in actively creating the future. After all, Winston Churchill knew when he said, "we never shall surrender..." the price of greatness is responsibility.

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