Management developers get two strategic routes

Tearing up the textbook

D uring the late 1990s, one of the world's best-known police forces was trying to engineer a total cultural change initiative.

It appeared, superficially at least, to be a fairly textbook process. This was not, however, the case. Towards the end of the assignment it became apparent that the cultural change initiative had started within the equivalent of the management development (MD) function, rather than – as might have been envisaged – with senior management.

To set the train of events in motion, a senior management developer had been an "agent provocateur", manipulating senior management to sign onto a cultural change and then succeeding in getting them to own it.

The perceived and real policies highlight different approaches to MD. MD functions do not always use their resources, either in terms of people or time, effectively. Often "administrative" or "welfare" aspects are developed at the expense of strategic issues or roles. With the rest of the human resources function becoming more concerned with strategy, there is a danger of MD being left behind.

To understand why this is the case we need to consider the work of Dave Ulrich and his model of potential roles for the HR function. He sees four roles: the employee champion; the administrative expert; the strategic business partner; and the change agent. The first two can be seen as operational, the others as strategic.

Ulrich himself says: "The [employee champion] role for HR professionals encompasses their involvement in the day-to-day problems, concerns, and needs of employees". Ulrich argues that HR professionals should be "active and aggressive" in developing the intellectual capital which is a critical source of a firm's value. This is an approach which is relatively safe and non-threatening.

More freedom needed

The idea of management developers as administrative experts also lies in the bottom – operational – section of Ulrich's quadrant model. There is great potential for reducing some administrative and operational activities, especially with the advent of new technology which, by automating many processes, can free up management developers to focus on more strategic roles.

MD functions have spent too much time on operational roles. There needs to be more emphasis on strategy. However, Ulrich is surely wrong in his tacit observation that HR functions and senior HR staff can play all four roles – the two strategic roles described by Ulrich are pretty much mutually exclusive.

The first option is for management developers to work as strategic business partners. HR can only have the credibility to be involved in strategic implementation if it is also involved in strategic deliberation and formulation. That requires the senior HR people to be full and equal partners in the executive team.

MD, then, has to be closely associated with senior executives. When General Electric was committed to a culture change a group of key MD people, including Ulrich, had extensive personal access to Jack Welch, then CEO. These MD experts were able, therefore, to spend time with key decision-makers rather than pursuing faddish management trends.

When management developers work as strategic business partners they are able to focus on outcomes and deliverables instead of participant feedback or process efficiency, which would be the case with the employee champion and administrative expert approaches respectively.

"Make change happen"

The change agent role for management developers is both strategic and process oriented. In this capacity Ulrich sees HR staff as change agents who "help make change happen; they understand critical processes for change, build commitment to those processes and ensure that change occurs as intended".

However, Ulrich is not alone in failing to understand fully and appreciate the dual nature of the change agent role. It is not simply a case of change implementation. Rather, change agents must hold up the mirror to the senior management of the organization. They are, therefore, concerned with both change implementation and the need for change.

In this light, it is easy to see why the strategic business partner role and the change agent role are potentially mutually exclusive. The strategic business partner works with the grain by helping senior executives to implement their strategic objectives. The change agent, on the other hand, is challenging and testing assumptions. As described earlier, this is what happened within the well-known police force during the 1990s

Muddled thinking

It is logical at this point to question the right to usurp the role of senior management in this fashion. First, every organization needs checks and balances so that the perceived wisdom is challenged and analyzed. Second, it is often the case that genuinely subversive people are the ones who want to see the status quo maintained when bad things happen within an organization. In other words, without the input of one or two "mavericks", muddled thinking and inappropriate strategy can go unchallenged with disastrous consequences.

Management developers need to review their activities, pay less attention to the operational end of the spectrum, and to forge a more strategic role for themselves. The $64,000 question has to be whether the path they choose is as a strategic business partner or as a change agent. They cannot really sit on both sides of this strategic fence.

Neither is necessarily right or wrong. The strategic business partner role is the safer road, working hand-in-hand with senior management. Change agents are embarking on a rockier route in which the rewards could be great but a wrong step could be dangerous, even career threatening, for the individuals concerned.

Management developers must pay their money and make their choice.

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Comment

This review is based on "Management development: in search of a new role?" by Kirkbride (2003). This article starts out as a rather dry account of the management development role, using a well-established model to consider four options. However, the writer's contentions that organizations need to place greater emphasis on strategic issues, and that the two approaches are mutually exclusive, are quite persuasive.

Reference

Kirkbride, P.S. (2003), "Management development: in search of a new role?", *Journal of Management Development*, Vol. 22 No. 2, pp. 171-80, ISSN: 0262-1711.