



A challenge to HR managers

Human resource managers need to appreciate the fact that they have a more enriching role to play in leadership writes MWANGI WANJUMBI.

IT IS NOT common to receive a call from an upset caller complaining of being slighted. It was even more surprising (to me) when the caller was female. Our overly conservative society is used to wishing away seemingly unpleasant experiences and simply moving on with life. But not the case with this human resource manager who felt that I ought to have addressed the company's human resource issues directly to her and not

the chief executive.

This was the basis of *Nancy's complaint, which took me by surprise. Nancy's explanation that she calls the shots in her department was impressive. "Nothing on staff matters can move without my authority. I am the expert in aligning the human element in the company. Why then should anybody give me instructions on what to do in my area of expertise?" she lamented. Of

course, I was apologetic about not having recognized Nancy's position even if only to tone her down.

After the apology, Nancy calmed down to listen. I first congratulated her for grabbing leadership in her organization. Leadership is never given on a silver plate. It is taken or grabbed. It is grabbed through taking charge. Nobody can ever tell you that you are now the leader on this or that. It is actually upon you to prove your

worth. Confidence (a key leadership trait) has enabled Nancy to mark her territory and at the same time affirm the same to both existing and new stake holders of her company. But are other human resource managers as lucky as Nancy? Surprisingly, not as Nancy was to learn.

My work substantially involves constantly dealing with human resource managers, training managers and sometimes the chief executives themselves. But the human resource managers are specifically charged with nurturing and developing this key resource. The expertise power of the HRM's could lead them into positions of influence which rival that of Nancy. But of course, the expertise needs to be combined with other leadership qualities such as integrity and being visionary amongst others. But then, many organizations have just changed the title of personnel manager to human resource manager. Some may just be following a trend of abandoning the earlier name without really distinguishing the true roles of the two. Perhaps this is occasioned by the fact that the human resource management function especially in developing countries is a recent development.

This human resource theory was initiated by Professor Elton Mayo in what is now known as the Hawthorne experiments in the 1920's and advanced by others like Abraham Maslow in 1943. It did not take shape in our country for example until the liberation of the economy in the early 90s. That human resource role used to be the domain of the personal managers whose work was mainly hiring and firing or simply disciplining staff on behalf of other departments. Other roles included payment of salaries and ensuring that the organization is compliant with the common bargaining agreement (CBA), maintained between the company and the union in most organizations. Some companies have certainly not

moved from this arrangement even now. But what really differentiates the human resource manager's role today with that of earlier personnel management?

In the situation where the economy is purely market oriented,

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the personnel manager is now out of time. The competitive business environment demands a new set of skills. The skills must be capable of recognizing changes in the market place and aligning the business as such. Apparently, today's organizational staff need to be armed with many soft skills such as innovation, communication, team orientation etc more than ever before.

Inevitably, today's human resource manager needs to have the ability of recognizing and aligning staff based on their abilities and talents, a great quality of leadership indeed. Unfortunately, most human resource managers do not have the luxuries of working independently as is the case of Nancy. It is the chief executives who make decisions even on matters such as discipline, leaving the human resource managers to play only advisory roles. Could it be as a result of failure of HRM's to display leadership qualities, therefore failing to take charge? Your guess is as good as mine.

Coincidentally, the same day I got a lashing from Nancy, I bumped into a former boss who received me the first day I got employed. *Mr. Odete was quite excited upon our

meeting. He could not hide his joy for meeting his former accountant who later became a management expert. "I had actually noticed your talents earlier in life. They were however not properly placed in an accounting environment. Accountants are not expected to be aggressive, extroverts and independent minded with a tendency of holding their own views strongly," Odete confessed.

This was unbelievable coming from my former boss. He was unknowingly admitting a serious flaw in many of those who are charged with authority. He was in fact admitting the lack of leadership qualities. Leaders do not suppress talents; they align staff to perform roles that are best suited to them. It is no wonder that many years after, I wrestled myself from where my bosses had put me. But this was only after liberalization of the economy as well as improved democratization which occurred in the early 1990s. The key consideration then and substantially even now was being in employment - period. Identifying, aligning and nurturing talents especially were never important issues. Luckily that is not the case any more.

That is why I am full of praise for Nancy who has beaten many of her compatriots in evolving from management to leadership in her own way. Inevitably, other human resource managers need to appreciate the fact that they have a more enriching role to play in leadership rather than just conforming to the past, as Nancy has experienced. It is upon them to grab the imminent opportunities of creating change not only in their organizations but also the national perspective. ■

**Names have been changed.*

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