

The Changing Role of HR

The Situation

The Company - a large former UK public sector utility, now privatised - has a significant HR department. Traditionally, HR had been seen as systems-oriented and inflexible, reacting to people issues that arose rather than leading the way and resourcing the organisation. As part of a new people management framework, there was a desire to shift the role of HR to an advisory and supportive one, seen by its internal clients as a centre of excellence, enabling good management and adding value.

The Analysis

Initial discussions with client representatives led to the following analysis:

The staff of the HR function included a wide range of backgrounds, both long-standing internal practitioners and some recruited from outside with varied experiences of HR.

Many of the HR staff had strong professional HR knowledge, but had felt they were expected to 'police' systems, working by status and authority.

The organisation was increasingly operating in a matrix structure.

In order to bring about desired organisation change, the HR function would have to use personal influence rather than positional power, and be appreciated for the value it adds to the business.

The HR team felt anxious about the level of skills they would require to operate in this more ambiguous environment, and about their understanding of what it would mean to operate, effectively, as internal consultants.

The Solution

A learning process was designed and implemented which included the following elements:

There would be two short training modules, separated by one month, and with pre- and post-course work to link the learning to participants' daily work.

All participants were asked to analyse a number of existing working relationships and projects, and to identify their approaches to influencing them.

This analysis formed the starting point for a 2-day workshop on effective influencing skills, by the end of which participants had identified and practised a number of alternative influence strategies within a clear framework of understanding.

Between the influencing and consulting modules, participants applied some of the skills they had learned to 'back home' situations (as planned during the first workshop) and also conducted a structured analysis of one current project in which each was involved.

The second module began with a workshop problem-solving review of the successes and difficulties of applying influence in real situations. This was followed by two extended "controlled pace" consulting simulations, enabling participants to learn the process and skills of effective consulting in a realistic environment.

The application planning at the conclusion of the second module included applying these learnings to the participants' own consulting assignments.

The Outcomes

At the beginning of the second workshop almost all participants were able to point to specific successes - some quite dramatic - they had achieved using more effective influencing skills.

Members of the HR team gained an enthusiasm for their change of role, and energy to apply to their consulting assignments the skills and techniques they had learned.

Following up the workshop with discussion one month later, participants were still enthusiastic and keen to apply their learnings to their current projects.