
The service of human resource management



Feena May

If ever there was a time that the transformative, human power of HR was needed in organisations its now. We – at least in Europe – are slowly taking our first hesitant steps to emerge from that last two years of hybrid workplaces. To what new workplace we are not yet too sure. More than ever, we need HR that ignites, energises, inspires our organisations to be what they were always meant to be – human communities engaged in a collective effort to make a difference. I believe that as we enter the post-COVID workplace, HR has the potential to lead organisations into the future, facilitate change, and support their organisation to evolve to a better future. I believe this is potentially the most exciting time for HR as it evolves to become leaders within their organisations.

I'm not some kind of idealist – I spent the first 30 years of my career in the humanitarian world, dealing with war. I actually believe in HR as game changers. Let me explain.

I went on mission with one of the big humanitarian agencies. It was 1992 and war was raging. The operational headquarters had a staff of about 200 people. It was a multi-cultural setting with over 40 different nationalities, though the majority of staff came from all the communities that were at war. There were periods when the problems of work, stress, security, management issues and the like weighed heavily. This brought the atmosphere down, created tensions and increased all the problems of work, stress, burnout – the “normal” suffering in organisations under stress.

When things were bad, I would take a giant bag of lollipops and go through the office building, into all the offices – from the directors to the tea-ladies – and offer to each person a lollipop. 200 adults with multi-coloured lollipops in their mouths changes a lot of things. The tension broke, people could breathe again, more work was done more fluidly, people talked to each other, problems didn't fester, and the organisation was a healthier place for a while.

I learned that small acts can change so much, and years later went off to study why. Why do small things – the act of handing out a lollipop – let flow the soft skills that keeps organisations together, let flow an emotional intelligence that gets built collectively in a non-threatening way, create a cohesion in teams and opens creative space to move forward in a better way towards a goal. I wanted to understand how an interaction at an individual level could create a change in the environment both at an individual and collective level. The lollipop became my metaphor.

By the time I had left that first mission, I had distributed 3,580 lollipops. Through my work and learning and conversations in the years that followed, I realised that what inspires, what moves organisations, the stuff that has impact at an individual and collective level and enables organisations to be inspiring can be captured in five simple acts, even if in their simplicity you find the greatest challenges.

This is not a theory (god forbid!) – it is rather a storyline for great HR, a storyline where HR can be the organisation’s role models and inspire.

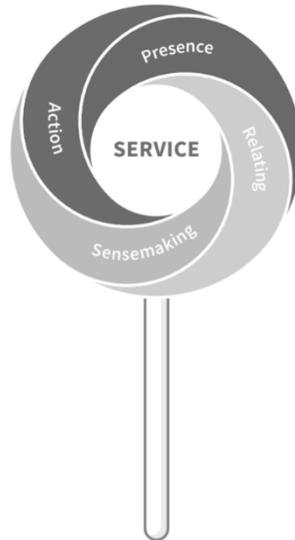


Fig. 1. Lollipop Model

The first act is to show up, to be **present**, so that the story can start. Presence allows us to stand powerfully in the moment, in themselves, in the space. It is only by being present that we can begin **relating** to the reality of what is going on around us, to the people, to the place. That capability to build a relationship, and through the process of building relationships we can have conversations, give and receive feedback, build circles and networks that are foundations to working together. Because we are present, we connect to others, we can begin the third work of HR, that essential and incredibly important act and role **sensemaking**. Sensemaking is that ability to make sense of the context that you are in and to translate that into vision. But it is not just the act of creating a vision, but more importantly it is the act of communicating that vision in a way in which the vast diversity of people you have around you can hear, understand, and be a part of. This is how we create leaders in organisations. From here – and only from here – we can move sustainably into right **action** – putting that vision into movement.

This makes for good organisations; great organisations – the ones who inspire – are those capable of enacting the fifth challenge of doing this in **service**. Service is what underpins our acts, the “why” of our story. Its more than purpose – it’s our “raison d’être”, the why of our being. Service encapsulates the offer we are making – to ourselves and others – by acting in a situation. Ensuring both are present (self and others) means that we have balance – and that’s always a good thing. And this is where HR today can thrive – inspiring service at a time when COVID has made that investment to ourselves and something greater than ourselves more difficult.

In all cultures, in all contexts, we tell stories – it is our way of making sense and passing on experience; storytelling is a unique and important human process – we do it all the time. HR can be, should be, the storytellers of organisations. Great, transformative HR

embodies these five challenges, and becomes example of this act of leadership. I call it an act of leadership as I believe real leadership is not in the title of managers in organisations – real leadership takes place all over organisations by people who take responsibility, who step up and step into the work and community. This is how we inspire, how we move organisations forward, how we make a difference. If this role model of HR sits in the centre of any organisation, then it is inspiring.

I have used this approach, my “lollipop model”, for many years now and it helps me know where I am and what I need to do – am I operating in all 5 areas? am I clear about my service and is my service about more than just me?. A true act of leadership – and I believe that HR needs to take its rightful place as leaders and inspirers of organisations – is when we, as a profession, are present, relate, make sense and take action in service. It is a view HR which is more holistic, ensuring that it is both effective and a positive contributor to sustainability of the future. My invitation to HR in this time of change and challenge, is to become the distributors of lollipops - to be the inspiring storytellers of your organisations, to be role models of acts of leadership. And my invitation to the leadership teams of organisations is to offer HR the space to make a difference – and inspire the future.

Feena May (feena@theinspiringcompany.com) is CEO of The Inspiring Company and is a recognized teacher and researcher in leadership and learning. Her leadership work builds on nearly 30 years of senior operational and leadership experience, as well as from living and working in over 20 different countries contexts, mostly during times of crisis and conflict. She teaches leadership in a number of European Universities and Business Schools.