

Miller, Vernon D. & Gordon, Michael E. (Eds.):

## **Meeting the Challenges of Human Resource Management: A Communication Perspective**

New York: Routledge, 2014, 283 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-63020-7 (hbk)

In today's society, a challenge that many human resource practitioners are expected to embrace with excellence is creating sustainable business value. Thus, practitioners must continually develop in their ability to actively and constructively use organizational resources to support strategic goals, objectives and tactics designed for an organization's success. When considered as a central tool in defined organizational success, communication may be used in many ways to meet the challenges in human resource management (HRM) while supporting its objective to plan, implement and evaluate human resource practices that maximize the on-strategy contributions of workers.

When one considers the unique staffing functions, policies and procedures needed to coordinate people with diverse organizational objectives and strategies, it becomes apparent that even the traditional functions of management – planning, organizing, leading, and controlling – are dependent upon strong and effective communication practices. This five-part book focuses on the three human resource management functions of staffing, developing, and conserving from a communication perspective. Miller and Gordon state: “*it is our thesis and that of our fellow contributors that the effectiveness of HRM is dependent on recognizing and incorporating appropriate communication practices*” (p. 4).

Part I includes two introductory chapters that explore historic ties and new relationships between the two fields – communication and human resource management (HRM). Specifically, Chapter 1 begins with the editors of the book providing a brief history of HRM, the structure of HRM, and an overview of the role HRM plays in staffing practices, developing practices, and conserving practices. In Chapter 2, titled *The Importance of Communication in Fulfilling the Strategic Role of HRM*, Sue Hutchinson moves the focus to strategic human resource management (SHRM) – what it is, its process, the added element of linking communication with strategic outcomes and other HRM practices – as well as electronic human resource management (e-HRM) and the concerns associated with the relationship between communication and performance. This chapter is significant in its placement and content because as a business-driven function human resource management's effectiveness is dependent upon a clear understanding of strategic direction communicated within organizations.

Part II has six chapters focused on *staffing* functions. Chapter 3, *Employee Recruitment*, centers on external recruitment and both the organization as a sender of recruitment-related messages and the perspective of a job applicant as the message recipient (p. 29). Several areas are explored including target audiences for recruitment messages, methods, media, message content, the recruiters, and the timing of recruitment communication.

Chapter 4, *Employee Selection*, “explores possible ways that an understanding of communication can contribute to the understanding and improvement of selection in organizations” (p. 40). Key areas discussed include (a) the core selection process and (b) analytical versus intuitive selection. In addition, the authors thoroughly “discuss the barriers to analytical selection originating at the HRM, organizational, and environmental levels” (p. 44). Thus, the chapter is engaging in its articulation of how “communication plays a role in managing the boundaries between the core process and the HRM function, the organizational culture, and the organizational environment...” (p. 47).

Chapter 5, *Effective New Employee Socialization: A Review of the Critical Role of Communication*, focused on two goals – “(a) “...to describe the manner in which organizational programs used to socialize new employees currently rely on effective communication and (b) to suggest expansion of these HR activities based on new streams of communication research (p. 52).

Chapter 6, *Promotions and Transfers*, summarizes “existing research that explores communication during the process of promotions and transfers, both domestic and international” (p. 64). Specifically, general issues with promotions and transfers are explored as well as specific issues related to promotions, domestic job transfers, and international job transfers.

Chapter 7, *Disclosure and Deception: Communication Issues in Organizational Disengagement*, focuses on the exit interview (EI). This chapter examines several intersections between HRM and communication. The emphasis on disclosure and deception provides timely insight into a key issue because strategic employment of human resources continues to increase.

Chapter 8, *How Staffing Functions Communicate to Organization Members and the Public*, offers several key perspectives of internal and external communication that are important in a time of increased change in the competitive market environment. The focus on communication involved in staffing functions sheds light on some of the urgency of HRM to play a more strategic role using communication as a tool to aid organizational success.

Part III is comprised of five chapters concerned with the *developing* function. In Chapter 9, *Meeting the Communication Challenges of Training*, the authors “address central issues facing organizations and HRM professionals with respect to training, beginning with an explanation of the communication-as-constitutive-of-organizing perspective that forms the foundation of [their] chapter. Then, [they] consider the trainer, trainee, and training itself as three aspects that an organization must consider in training” (p. 97).

Assessment becomes a focus in Chapter 10, *The Appraisal Interview: Finding the Right Words*. “The purpose of this chapter is to deepen [understanding of] these earlier findings by examining how consideration of communication principles can improve the AI [Appraisal Interview] and to suggest several existing streams of communication research with the potential to produce further insight into useful procedures for providing performance feedback” (p. 110).

In Chapter 11, *Leadership, Ingratiation, and Upward Communication in Organizations*, leadership is problematized. The layers of the two established and linked fields – hu-

man resource management and communication – are evident through the exploration of this intersection of interests and perspectives.

Chapter 12, *Change Management*, “focuses on three critical aspects of [an] HRM professionals’ communication with employees during change: (1) soliciting employee input about change; (2) disseminating information and contending with alternate framing of change; and (3) the importance of creating ways to surface and resolve perceived problems with change initiative” (p. 135).

In Chapter 13, *Implications of Communication Research for Improving Developing Policies, Procedures, and Functions*, Patricia M. Sias discusses implications for improvement “by briefly establishing [her] theoretical groundings as an overall framework for discussing the chapters. [She] then address[es] each chapter, discussing its contributions as well as insights for additional research development” (p. 145).

Part IV, focuses on *conserving* practices used in HRM including attitude surveys (chapter 14); compensation systems (chapter 15); employee safety and health management (chapter 16); workforce diversity (chapter 17); work-life issues (chapter 18); information and communication technologies (chapter 19); and globalization (Chapter 20).

Specifically, in Chapter 14, *Attitude Surveys*, the authors “examine the communicative issues facing HRM professionals and the roles they play related to surveying employee attitudes” (p. 156). The explorer role, advocate role, and facilitator role are examined individually. In addition, several methods of assessing attitudes – questionnaires, interviews, network analysis, work observations and textual analysis – are described effectively.

In Chapter 15, *How Communication Affects Employee Knowledge of and Reactions to Compensation Systems*, the authors “provide an overview of the scholarly research on several key aspects of compensation communication” (p. 167). Specifically, two dimensions are explored. First, the authors offer insight about policies including – open pay policies and pay data communication policies. They state that: “communicating with employees about compensation involves the management of pay data itself” (p. 169). At the other end of the spectrum, “organizations also provide information that helps employees interpret pay data, understand how their current pay is determined, and understand how to increase their compensation in the future” (p. 171). Thus, they offer insight into modes of communicating pay information and future research directions.

In Chapter 16, *The Role of Communication in Employee Safety and Health Management*, the focus turns to a conception framework linking safety/health communication to safety/health outcomes. The authors are clear that they “assume there is no one-best safety and health communication strategy” (p. 180). At the same time, they demonstrate through this chapter that it is important to continually engage in research in order to provide practice recommendations.

Diversity is the emphasis of Chapter 17, *Managing Diversity through Effective Communication*. “The purpose of this chapter is to review how various human resource practices can promote or hinder diversity in organizations and to highlight the important role communication plays in the effective application of diversity management programs and procedures in organizations” (p. 193).

Chapter 18, *Work-Life Issues*, addresses another layer of conserving practices. “The goal of this chapter is to bring research on work-life communication, as well as related communication theory and skills, together with the study and practice of HRM. To do so, relevant communication research is organized around three roles an HRM practitioner may play in relation to work-life policy issues: resource, coach, and strategist” (p. 204). In addition, the authors share a research agenda for scholars interested in further investigating the intersections among HRM, communication, and work-life policy, and suggestions for HRM practice.

Chapter 19, *Media Management: The Integration of HRM, Technology, and People*, “focuses on two major changes in communication practices – organizational translucency and eHRM, or self-service HRM – that have resulted from the pervasiveness of ICTs” (p. 215).

Chapter 20, *Global Operations*, “provides a contemporary evaluation of the IHRM field and the role that communication plays in managing human resources across global operations” (p. 228).

Finally, in Chapter 21, *Implications of Communication Research for Improving Conserving Policies, Procedures, and Functions*, the authors illuminate implications of communication research that complement Human Resource Management (HRM) “initiatives that are intended to ensure the availability of employees to fill their organizational roles...” (p. 239).

Part V consists of a single chapter. Specifically, in Chapter 22, *Mapping the ‘Trading Zones’ of Communication and Human Resource Management*, the editors – Miller and Gordon – effectively use Peter Galison’s (1997) “trading zone” metaphor as a recap of communication issues and scholarship opportunities discussed by each chapter’s author(s). Several action steps may be derived from this chapter to help meet the challenges of human resource management by focusing on communication phenomenon such as audience analysis, message construction, and others.

Overall, the editors and contributors successfully reached the goal of this book “to identify linkages between the disciplines of HRM and communication...” (p. 9). Early in the book, Miller and Gordon, encourage readers “to ponder the ideas regarding communication presented in association with the HRM practices in each section of the book” (p. 13). The ideas presented are numerous and thought provoking. A major strength of the approach taken in reviewing the linkages is the capstone in each section provided by senior scholars. The book contributors have made a strong and effective stride in addressing some of the often neglected communication issues in human resource management.

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Rainhart Lang & Irma Rybnikova

### **Aktuelle Führungstheorien und -konzepte**

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After Neuberger (2002) and Weibler (2012) there now is a third German book on managerial leadership and leadership theories. Rainhart Lang and Irma Rybnikova wrote a book that, according to the authors, covers both current leadership theories and concepts. Their selection of theories, concepts and themes encompasses new theories and concepts within the domain of leadership studies. The authors' aim is to put these to test and to make them subject to a critical evaluation.

The book covers nine different theories and themes that are representing the canon of current theorising in leadership studies. We learn about the psychoanalytical leadership approach, implicit leadership theories, neo-charismatic leadership theory, myths of leadership and the romance of leadership, shared and distributed leadership, leadership from a micro-politics perspective, women and leadership, virtual leadership, and global leadership. With the selection of the theories presented in the book the authors, although disclaiming completeness, highlight some of the theoretical avenues of current leadership research, which are most often addressed, and therefore influence current leadership studies and leadership practice.

The authors claim that their book should serve students and scholars within the field of social sciences and business administration (for some, these are still separate areas). Furthermore, they attempt to address 'theory-minded' managers and consultants, who could arguably benefit from immersing themselves in research-related literature. I believe that the authors' decision to structure each of the chapters similarly eventuates in the specific audience of the book. The book starts out by providing a brief introduction, outlining the historical context and the main ideas of leadership research. This is followed by a presentation of the central arguments and thought-figures of each theory. Furthermore, the authors pay particular attention to empirical studies that are representative for each theory, detailing both methods and findings. Afterwards, the reader learns about practical applications of the theory. Finally, each chapter closes with a critical evaluation of the theory.

After reading Lang and Rybnikova's book, I asked myself what makes it unique, given that there is no shortage on books providing overviews of theories and concepts in the domain of managerial leadership? Put differently, what is its contribution beyond the above mentioned books from Weibler (2012) and Neuberger (2002) and books such as Northouse (2012), Yukl (2012), or (if I may add my own humble attempt) Winkler (2010) – all three in English language? From my point of view, exploring this aspect is essential in order to evaluate what Lang and Rybnikova add to the canon of leadership theories presented in other books, which also claim to overview the leadership research landscape. Comparing the list of theories and concepts presented in Lang and Rybnikova's book with the above-mentioned literature, one mainly observes similarities. This means that the two authors, in my opinion, offer the same

or similar theories and concepts that one could find in other books. However, is this all there is to it?

I personally believe that the value of the book does not lie in the selection of particular theories, but rather in the way the authors read and present the field. Firstly, one could observe the authors' sound background in organisation and social theory, a background that contributes to anchor the leadership theories in a broader conceptual perspective. Secondly, Lang and Rybnikova make a distinctive attempt to link theoretical content with empirical research and managerial application. They do so by highlighting empirical methods and approaches that are used by scholars, who conduct research following either one of the leadership theories presented in the book. Furthermore, selectively illuminating particular empirical studies contributes to a better understanding of the theories' content. In terms of managerial application, the authors show how the conceptual background of each theory influenced leadership practice. Hence, they trace how theoretical understanding has been translated into managerial, or more precisely, leadership activity. Thirdly, it appealed to me that Lang and Rybnikova decided to use one case incident throughout the entire book. They offer different readings of the case incident depending on which theoretical perspective the case is applied to. Finally, I really enjoyed reading the intermezzo, a refreshing chapter on leadership insights from various fields and perspectives. Well done!

However, there are also a few aspects that I disfavoured and that somehow got in the way of fully enjoying the book. I appreciate the authors' ambition to provide a figure for each theory depicting the "Grundstruktur" of each approach. Yet, as it is the case with most of such basic ideas-portrayals, they are (necessarily) simplifying and reducing. Personally, I would avoid trying to represent a complex theory such as the neo-charismatic leadership approach or a multi-facetted theme such as women and leadership in one figure.

Furthermore, I would have appreciated to learn more on theorising leadership from a social-constructionist vantage point, although I found traces in the chapters on symbolic leadership and leadership myths. This is something I cannot find in almost all current leadership textbooks. It appears to me as if the early works developing a distinct social-constructionist approach to understand leadership, such as Brown and Hosking (1986), Dachler and Hosking (1995), Dachler (1999), or the more recent work of Grint (2005), Pye (2005) and Fairhurst and Grant (2010) are not deemed as worthy enough to be recognized as distinct theoretical line of thinking in leadership textbooks. I also missed a chapter on critical leadership thinking following the ideas of for example Alvesson (1996), Cunliffe (2009), Alvesson and Sveningsson (2003) and Alvesson and Spicer (2012). Here, however, I also see the difficulty of presenting a full chapter about critical leadership research, as this clearly constitutes an emerging field within leadership studies. So, perhaps we may see something on this in the second edition?

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