

How to raise the profile of HR

by

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If you asked 20 people in your organisation: "What is HR and what does it do?" you might hear many different - and often conflicting - answers.

When posing the question myself, I've heard the HR department described as "the corridor of death"; haunted by an individual nicknamed "the Terminator". In another organisation, an employee responded: "HR? Oh, they're like angels of doom: only seen in times of trouble, swooping down and taking people away – never to be seen again."

For an HR department to be influential, it often needs to raise its profile and counteract such negativity or uncertainty. So imagine that you are an in-house consultancy, providing a service to the organisation. If people had the option of going elsewhere, how might that affect your approach? How would you publicise your service? What level of customer care would you provide?

The following steps are designed to help you improve the image and raise the profile of your department, which in turn will help to build your credibility.

1 ESTABLISH YOUR SERVICE

To be credible within your organisation, you need to be absolutely clear about who you are and what you do. Consider the following areas:

- What do you actually do? What set of services do you offer?

- Define the benefits of your service to both the staff and the organisation.
- What would be the negative impact on the organisation if you weren't there?
- Examine how you are currently perceived, and how you want to be perceived.

2 FIND OUT WHAT OTHERS THINK

Go out to the people who use your services and seek their opinions. If you can't ask everyone, then make sure that you get a representative sample. You could do this by handing out a quick questionnaire that asks: "What services does HR offer? What do you like about HR? What would you like HR to do differently?" Keep it brief - you don't want to put people off.

Make sure that you:

- Place the questionnaire in people's hands, rather than leaving it on their desks.
- Say why you are giving the questionnaire out. For example: "We are reviewing the service we offer and need your input so that we can deliver what people really want."
- Tell them you'll be back in an hour to pick up the questionnaire. Then ensure that you are back in an hour.

3 MAKE SURE YOU CAN DO IT

Once you feel that you have a good overview of employees' perceptions, you will need to decide on which changes to implement. But remember: if you tell people that you are improving your services but then fail to live up to the promise, you may cause more cynicism than if you never changed in the first place. Establish what your limits are - other departments may be more skilled at tackling particular employee concerns - and ensure that you have an achievable plan of action and that everyone in your HR department is clear about their role.

4 PUBLICISE YOUR SERVICE

In addition to managing what you do, you will need to manage people's perceptions of what you do. So create your own HR brand, for example, by using an in-house logo. You could also have a tagline, such as: "For all the people matters" or "Not just here for the difficult times":

So that people have total clarity about your role, give some quick input at staff inductions to brief people on what you do. Create an interesting intranet site if you don't already

have one and publish a leaflet that outlines, preferably in bullet points, the services you now offer; the benefits of your service to individuals and the organisation; contact details, including who does what in the department; and your logo and tagline.

5 IMPRESS THOSE AT THE TOP

As well as raising your profile with the workforce, you need to gain credibility with senior managers and directors. Remember that you are an authority in your own field, so be confident of your role and opinion.

Do your homework before going to management or board meetings. Show that you have your finger on the pulse: learn the organisational priorities; know as many names in the company as possible (especially the movers and shakers); and understand what is happening inside and outside the organisation. If money is their bottom line, then speak their language and talk in those terms.

6 WALK THE TALK

As already mentioned, when implementing changes that will raise your profile, it is essential that you do what you say you will. You then need to add that extra ingredient of "customer care": Meet people face to face and introduce yourself to those who don't know you. You could also go along to team meetings to hear people's concerns. But let them know why you are there and ask their permission beforehand. Producing a brief in-house newsletter is another good way to maintain your relevance and profile. Put your logo on it and write things that are worth reading, such as information about changes that may affect

staff. Talk to people in their own language, not HR-speak. Publish the successes of HR and acknowledge the good work done by others.

Key points

- Seek to build your credibility.
- Act like a consultancy - as if the future of your department depends on your service and marketing excellence.
- Make sure that you are 100 per cent clear about what you do and why you play an important role.
- Reach out to all levels of the organisation and let them know who you are and how you can benefit them.
- Note the longer-term, bigger-picture trends in your organisation and adapt accordingly.
- Do what you say you will.

7 *MAINTAIN THE MOMENTUM*

"Walking the talk" is an ongoing process, not a one-off, so seek feedback from people, perhaps through a brief annual "expectations" survey. And here's the final challenge: keep adapting to the needs of the organisation while adopting changes in legislation and maintaining your own integrity as an HR service. At the end of the day, if you are performing your function to the best of your ability, your profile will rise accordingly.

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