

## Redefining the Role of HR

*By Dave Ulrich*

Most of us who work in and around colleges and universities fail to appreciate their extensive history as organizations and thus some of their unique human resources requirements. Institutions of higher learning have been around for millennia as the Church and government created communities of scholars and teachers to advance knowledge. Colleges and universities were somewhat isolated and protected institutions where abstract thinking and creative teaching could shape the way people think about and see their world.

While the basic functions of higher ed institutions to generate and generalize ideas have remained constant, recent environmental and social changes have redefined how colleges and universities operate. Technology now moves institutions from brick-and-mortar places to massive open online courses where students can access faculty from remote locations. Technology also affects dissemination of research findings from journals that may take months for publication with extensive peer reviews to immediate online outlets. Funding of institutions has become more demanding with the cost of education going up and the sources of funding becoming a more complex mix of government, tuition, donation and sponsored research. Students, who used to be primarily between the ages of 18 and 25, are now lifetime learners who approach higher education very differently. University types are diverging, which creates competition and new business models for learning.

In the face of these and other changes, HR professionals face the daunting task of “adding value.” At one level, HR professionals build the infrastructure of the institution so that all employees have their administrative requirements (hiring, payroll, benefits, 401K, etc.) flawlessly delivered. However, as these foundational HR transactions are increasingly delivered through technology, HR professionals at colleges and universities now have the challenge (and opportunity) to redefine the value they create in the unique higher ed setting.

In our work on the future of HR, my colleagues and I have asserted that HR professionals deliver value in three domains: talent, leadership and capability (culture). **Talent** refers to helping an organization define, identify, source, motivate, engage and retain talent for today and tomorrow. Often called human capital, HR’s focus on talent ensures that the right people are in the right job with the right skills and commitments to use those skills. **Leadership** refers not just to the C-suite executives, but to the leaders throughout an organization. Shared, or collective, leadership means that decision makers at whatever level recognize the requirements for success, collect information to make decisions and make informed choices. HR professionals define what leaders should be, know and do and coach and develop these leaders to help them make wise choices about their organization’s future. An organization’s **capability** has been defined as culture, processes, resources or social networks. The organization’s capability defines what the organization is known for and good at and becomes a key factor in shaping how the organization works as a system. HR professionals deliver value by connecting talent, leadership and capability not only with an organization’s strategy, but with its external business conditions and key stakeholders.

In higher ed institutions, the issues of talent, leadership and capability are paramount to success, but because of the nature of colleges and universities, they require subtlety in their application. A simplistic typology of university employees separates academic staff from support staff. Academic staff includes researchers, scholars, authors, professors and teachers who bring deep expertise to the scholarship and education mission of an institution. Support staff encompasses the numerous administrators, facility managers, technology experts, registration and enrollment experts, and so forth who make the institution operate. With this distinction, we can begin to look at how HR professionals can add the most value through talent, leadership and culture.

### **HR and Talent**

HR professionals understand and help make choices about the entire flow of talent in an organization. However, HR folks should take a back seat on talent requirements for academic staff. It would not be wise for HR professionals to define standards for faculty or research staff, to interview potential candidates, to build an employee value proposition to attract candidates, to orient new hires, or to do performance reviews (e.g., tenure). Because academic staff are so central to an institution's core mission and because the technical requirements for academic success (peer reviewed research, innovative teaching) are so specialized within a given discipline, other faculty hire faculty. It would be unwise for HR professionals to try and build their credibility and add value by intruding in the academic support talent processes. In this light, university academic staff are a bit like doctors in a hospital, actors in a movie production, or elite athletes. These uniquely talented individuals need to be vetted and managed by others with similar skills.

For support staff, HR professionals play a more traditional and involved role with talent. They work with leaders to set standards, source candidates, screen, hire, orient, review, compensate and motivate employees. In these more traditional talent management roles, HR professionals collaborate with administrative leaders to establish the requirements of key positions and to fill those positions. The distinction of HR's talent responsibilities for academic and support staff requires that HR professionals know when to be more proactive and advocating (support staff) and when to be more reactive and docile (academic staff).

### **HR and Leadership**

Just like academic and support roles differ in colleges and universities, so do leaders in those roles. Most academic leadership roles are filled by faculty who accept department, college or provost leadership roles on a contract or rotating basis. Generally, academic leaders have been credible faculty who have earned the respect of their colleagues and who are willing to assume the leadership for their department or college. These roles generally are for a specific time period and relieve the faculty member of research and teaching duties during this time. In these roles, leaders set strategy, manage budgets and schedules, deal with faculty issues (e.g., hiring, salary increases, promotion), and coordinate with other university departments. As faculty scholars, few of these leaders have formal leadership training. HR professionals who work with these often new-to-leadership individuals can play a significant behind-the-scenes coaching role in helping them recognize and learn the skills of leadership. Just like most professors learn how to teach by teaching and not by being formally trained to teach, most academic leaders learn how to lead from observing experiences of previous leaders and from trial and error. While generally smart, insightful and experts in their academic disciplines, academic leaders often do not recognize the

disciplines and skills of leadership. HR professionals can work with academic leaders in the following ways to fulfill the requirements of effective leadership:

- **Strategy:** HR professionals can help academic leaders define the key requirements of an effective strategy by focusing on the future, anticipating external demands, defining key decisions and building deliverable plans.
- **Execution:** HR professionals can help academic leaders manage change, build accountability and deliver schedules and results.
- **Talent management:** HR professionals can help academic leaders coach faculty, communicate goals to an organization unit, develop staff and create appropriate reward and promotion processes.
- **Human capital development:** HR professionals can help academic leaders develop future talent by empowering faculty, building workforce plans for the future and helping manage careers.
- **Personal proficiency:** HR professionals can help academic leaders maintain personal credibility by building their emotional intelligence, helping them manage their time and calendars, and finding emotional support for leadership.

In helping academic leaders, HR professionals are likely to do more coaching than formal leadership training, as each academic leader comes with a unique leadership predisposition. To be effective as coaches, HR professionals need to build relationships of trust, find early successes and tailor their counsel to the styles of the academic leader they coach. HR professionals should ideally be invited in to help academic leaders accomplish their leadership goals.

For support leadership roles, HR professionals may also build leadership skills in strategy, execution, talent, human capital and personal proficiency. In these cases, since these leadership requirements for support functions may be similar across university departments, HR professionals may create leadership training activities and workshops that help leaders deliver what their position requires.

### **HR and Capability**

Ask anyone why they admire an organization, and they can generally come up with quick answers: Apple for innovation; Walmart for cost; Marriott for service; and Disney for the guest experience. These admirable identifiers in the minds of customers become an organization's brand or identity. When these external identities transfer to internal employee behaviors, the organization creates a culture that shapes both how the organization is known and how employees think and act.

Higher ed institutions create capabilities, or cultures, at multiple levels. Institutions as a whole create an identity and culture of scholarship, community service or student engagement. One thoughtful university president created the tag line "genius of small" to communicate to external stakeholders (e.g., parents, donors) that the university would focus on the needs of each individual student. This mantra translated to faculty also focusing on individual student needs and creating a culture of personal attention. Another university president worked to create the identity of "serious, engaged and inclusive." Under this rubric, this president committed to external stakeholders (e.g., legislatures, alumni, donors, potential employers) and to internal

constituents (faculty, staff and students) that the school would balance serious scholarship with engagement with the community and with commitment to a broad and inclusive group of students. These capabilities, or cultures, at the university level are owned by the senior leaders, but HR professionals can play a significant role in architecting the conversations to create them and in designing the systems to implement them.

For academic leaders with excellent scholarship and nascent leadership, HR professionals can coach and facilitate the creation of a culture within a department or college. HR professionals can collect data on how the academic unit is perceived both outside and inside, about how the organization unit makes decisions, shares information, handles conflict and treats people. Academic departments may vary dramatically in their cultures or capabilities, often because they emerge without much guidance. HR professionals who become cultural guardians can help shape conversations to define the desired culture, then create HR practices to embed that culture.

For support staff, culture becomes a critical predictor of how well the support unit meets expectations. When support staff recognizes the outcomes it wants to be known for by key stakeholders (e.g., IT might be known for providing easy access to the latest technology to all university employees), the culture may be built to make this identity a reality. As staff support groups face change (e.g., attracting students, financially supporting students, managing facilities, etc.), the culture should also change to define desired future outcomes.

### **Flexibility Is Key**

Universities are complex and changing organizations, and HR professionals should know that one size does not fit all. While the outcomes of talent, leadership and capability may be common across the university, the specific roles and responsibilities of HR professionals for each outcome may vary depending on the employee group. As HR professionals recognize and act on these subtleties, they will help universities fulfill their unique missions.

*Dave Ulrich is a renowned professor, author, speaker and management coach and consultant. He currently is a professor in the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan and partner in the RBL Group, a global HR consulting firm.*

