

Professional and Organizational Values in Human Resource Management

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The question of growing professionalism among resource executives (hereafter HREs) and its implications to their overall business conduct, is the focal point for this study. The expanded role for HREs is creating conflicts between their traditional attitudes and values and the new attitudes and values that are expected of them. An attempt is made to document the extent of the conflict between a professional orientation and an organizational orientation among senior HREs. The latter is based on a comprehensive survey conducted among senior human resource executives in 141 Canadian/ Quebec firms. Results show very clearly the types of HREs who experience difficulty in adapting to corporate demands that they adopt more of an organizational orientation.

Professionalism in HRM

The increasing complexity and intensity of business competition in recent years has elevated the importance of "internal organization" for business success. To gain the cooperation of employees requires that, to varying degrees, they be empowered with authority and responsibility within the organization. Not surprisingly, this new emphasis on the role of human resources in the successful business enterprise has placed greater demands on Human Resource Executives (HREs) than had previously been the case (Dolan and Schuler, 1994). To serve the company properly, senior HREs must now become more aware of, and involved in, the needs of the business as a whole rather than simply the issues of compensation, promotion, and grievances that constituted the traditional personnel manager's concerns (Eichinger 1989; Blake 1988). If in the past HREs could be "reactive" in the organization, now they are expected to be "proactive"; their ideas and actions can have an influence on corporate objectives, policies, and strategies (see for example Walker 1986).

The expanded role for HREs is creating conflicts between their traditional attitudes and values and the new attitudes and values that are expected of them. In the past, when HREs played passive staff roles, their attitudes and values were shaped more by their professional identities as human resource managers than by their corporate identities as organization men and women. As more is expected of HREs, many have

difficulty shedding their traditional professionally oriented points of view for the sake of the new organizational requirements. Unless they overcome these limitations, HREs may be unable to assume the more important roles in the corporate organization that are required of them.

To be specific, Gordon (1987) has identified three shortcomings of the traditional HRE: (1) Failure to tie dollars and cents implications to human resource issues; (2) Lack of general business knowledge and skills; and (3) Under utilization of available resource management tools.

The result is a "latent value crisis" for HREs because they experience a conflict between their narrower, traditional roles as human resource professionals and their broader, modern roles of business people.

In classifying HREs along these lines, Holder (1986) has distinguished between "type A" (business first) and "type B" (professional first). He has contended that HREs who attempt to assume the modern "type A" roles must come to see themselves first and foremost as partners in the business who share in the tasks required to make the company succeed. As such they must compromise "type B" values that reflect the altruistic professional playing the role of consultant within the organization. In a similar fashion, Blake (1989) considers there to be a value conflict between the new requirement for senior HREs to be generalists who are committed to the business and the traditional requirement that they be professionals who are committed to the policies, techniques and practices of human resource management. Raelin et al. (1985) argue that some HREs will view the integration of the human resource function into strategic management as an opportunity to assume a more prominent and powerful role within the business organization, while others will view it as a threat to the maintenance of traditional professional values.

These issues have been debated more generally in the sociological literature. Over three decades ago Merton (1957) argued that the mark of a professional is someone who abides by the code of ethics of his or her profession even if that code conflicts with the demands of the particular organizations for which he or she works. Gouldner (1975) contended that when such conflicts arise, professionals resolve them by leaving the organization and finding employment elsewhere - a strategy that Hirschman (1970) would refer to as "exit" as distinct from "voice". Appelbaum (1980) has asserted that the continuous attempt to balance organizational, social, and individual interests is inimical to the maintenance of professionalism. By the same token, those executives who maintain high levels of "professional orientation" in the exercise of their work within the organization are likely to be less influential as well as less capable of exercising power at the strategic organizational levels because strategic management often requires "bending" the rules of the professional game for the sake of gaining flexibility and competitive advantage.

The conflict between professional and organizational values is moot, however, if HREs cannot be classified as members of a group who clearly adhere to code of professional ethics. Yoder and Heneman (1979) have given the following criteria for a HRE to be a true professional: (1) The HRE must regard the obligation to implement public objectives and to protect the public interest as more important than blind loyalty to an employer's preferences. (2) In daily practice, the professional must thoroughly understand the problems assigned and must undertake whatever study and research is required to assure continuing competence and the best of professional attention. (3) The practitioner must maintain a high standard of personal honesty and integrity in every phase of daily practice. (4) The professional must give thoughtful consideration to the personal interest, welfare, and dignity of all employees who are affected by his/her prescriptions, recommendations, and actions. (5) Professionals must make very sure that the organizations that represent them maintain a high regard and respect for the public interest and that they never overlook the importance of the personal interests and dignity of employees.

If HREs adhere to such a code of ethics, the issue is then whether, in the service of their corporate employers, decisions that they must make to deal with business and market realities compel them to compromise these values. Even if HREs are professionals, the conflict between professional and organizational values is moot if HREs are not expected to be involved in a significant way in business decision-making.

A study by Blake (1988) found that the majority of CEOs interviewed did expect their senior HREs to be full-fledged members of the executive team, proactive, operations-minded, and preoccupied with change in all of its aspects. Senior HREs were expected to be involved in such activities as merger and acquisition decisions as well as strategic planning of skill development and utilization.

For senior HREs to gain strategic influence, they must have the support of the CEO, the confidence of peers, and an aggressive, proactive style (Blake 1988, 1989). The literature on strategic human resource management indicates clearly that the route to influence is not through outside associations but through a better understanding of the senior HREs company and, in particular, the company's core competencies. Such a senior HRE must be less a professional whose (in Blake's words) "personal interest and commitment is to the human resource function and to the activities and program of that function", and more a generalist whose "personal commitment and interest is to the business as a whole" (Blake 1989: 13). In analyzing the determinants of the degree of influence on company strategy that HREs in his sample had, Bale hypothesized that high influence is associated with a generalist role orientation and low influence with a professional role orientation. Unfortunately, his empirical findings did not support his "generalist" hypothesis.

This study attempts to document the extent of the conflict between a professional orientation and an organizational orientation among senior HREs. We also analyze

the sources of this conflict in values. Our main purpose is to discover the characteristics of HREs who experience this conflict as well as the basis on which they choose between a professional and organizational orientation. In view of the distance between a priori hypotheses and empirical findings in the literature of the subject, we view this empirical research as a necessary prelude to a rigorous specification of hypotheses concerning the sources of value conflict among HREs. The ultimate goal of this line of research is to identify the types of HREs who experience difficulty in adapting to corporate demands that they adopt more of an organizational orientation.

Methods and Procedures

A survey among senior HREs of 467 largest private-sector manufacturing firms in Canada was conducted and 141 questionnaires (i.e. 30.2%) were returned. Data were gathered on four types of variables: personal characteristics of the individual respondents, the evolution of HRM influence on strategic management over time, measures of their professionalism, and measures of their strategic influence. The questionnaire provided most of the data on personal characteristics (i.e. education, age, and experience); inter-organizational mobility was proxied using the ratio of their work experience with the current employer to their age; data on perceptions concerning the evolution of HRM influence over time, professionalism and strategic influence was gathered through the use of Likert-type scales. All multi items constructs were re-analyzed using factor analysis procedures and new indices were ultimately computed based on these analyses.

Results

Personal Characteristics:

On the basis of this sample, the typical HRE officer was male, 40 years of age, held a Bachelor's degree, and had over twelve years in the field of human resources. Eighty two percent of HRE were members of a professional association. In terms of strategic influence, 60% reported directly to the President, 22% reported to a Vice President, and 18% reported to others.

Professional attitudes concerning the practice of HRM:

On a scale of 1 (totally disagree) to 4 (totally agree) fully 86% of the respondents agreed that human resource managers should have academic degrees or diplomas relevant to the discipline as a prerequisite to practice; 57% thought that the practice of human resource management should be overseen and regulated by a professional organization; almost three-quarters (73%) disagreed that competent non-human resource managers could perform satisfactorily in human resource management without undergoing extensive training; and, 78% of the respondents supported the position that HRM should be governed by a professional code of ethics. Ninety-one

percent strongly agreed that human resource managers required at least one academic course or seminar per year to remain up-to-date in the discipline. Yet, despite this strong support for professionalism in HRM, 82% of the respondents believed that corporate policies should dominate when they came into conflict with the code of ethics of the HRM profession.

Dimensions of professionalism

Principal components factor analysis based on two principal dimensions of professionalism yields the results reported in Table 1. Factor 1, which groups together items a, b, and c of the defining characteristics of professionalism, was labelled PROFESSIONAL ORIENTATION. This factor represents the degree of support from senior HREs for regulatory control over HRM as a profession; Factor 2, which groups together item d and e above, was labelled ORGANIZATION ORIENTATION. This factor is measured by a scale that represents the extent to which HREs perceive that they are managers rather than professionals.

Table 1. Sorted Varimax Rotated Factor Loadings on Professionalism

	Professional Orientation	Organizational Orientation
a. HRM Need to possess degree in the discipline	.69	.07
b. HRM need to be regulated by professional corporation	.86	.13
c. Any manager can perform well in HRM (no extensive training needed)	.15	.85
d. HRM should be bound to adhere to an ethical code	.77	-.23
e. HRM should conform to corporate policy even when conflict arises regarding personal code of ethics	-.22	.52

Strategic Influence

The results of the principal components factor analysis yielded what we are calling the **SI Index**, measuring strategic influence. As already indicated, included in the SI Index are factors such as the direct input of senior HREs into corporate decision-making and strategies, the input of their department on corporate decision-making, their influence on the operational decision-making of non-HREs executives, their informal relations with the CEO, and the degree of support that the CEO gives to the human resource function. The SI Index contained 5 questions, and its internal reliability alpha is .76.

The evolution of strategic influence

Respondents indicated that over the past five years support for HRM by line personnel and the CEO/COO increased significantly. Fully 82% reported an increase of support to HRM by the CEO, while 86% reported an increase of support on the part of other line managers. Eighty-nine percent believed that the HR department in the organization had increased its influence over the past five years, and 98% of all HREs perceive their influence to be equivalent to other senior executives in the organization.

Professionalism, Strategic Influence and Personal Characteristics

Table 2 presents the simple bivariate correlation between each of the two dimensions of professionalism (that is, professional orientation or organization orientation) with Strategic Influence (SI), and selected personal characteristics of the respondents.

The results in Table 2 indicate that strategic influence is not significantly related to either an organization or professional orientation, as we have measured them. Rather, various personal characteristics of the senior HREs have significant impacts on whether they have a professional orientation or organization orientation. HREs with more education and income tend to have more of a professional orientation. We can hypothesize that these people are more secure in their careers and less dependent on the particular organization that employs them. Hence these more educated and

Table 2. Pearson Product Moment Correlation¹

	Professional Orientation	Organizational Orientation
SI	n.s	n.s
Education	.14	n.s
Work experience(present job)	-.25	n.s
Overall HR Experience	n.s	-.18
Administrative Experience	-.18	n.s
Income	.15	-.19
Age	n.s	-.22
Mobility	-.26	-.15

¹ Only significant correlations are reported (P < .005)

² n.s. not significant

higher income HREs feel under less pressure to adopt an organization orientation. Those with more work experience with the current company and more administrative experience tend to have less of a professional orientation. But these last two factors do not yield a greater organizational orientation. Apparently, over time the process of being a manager for a company severs one's professional links, even work experiences with the company and administrative experience in general do not replace the professional orientation. Those who are older and have high income, extensive HR experience, a small amount of employment mobility tend to have a low level of organizational orientation. For example, the negative relation between income and organization orientation suggests that those with relatively low incomes have not been successfully integrated into the organization, while those with high incomes can resist pressures to sacrifice professional goals for organizational goals. A low level of job mobility would lead one to expect a high level of organization orientation, as the results indicate. But the negative relation between job mobility and professional orientation is even stronger. These last results get at the heart of the conflict between professional and organizational goals. HREs need stable employment in well-established companies in order to pursue their careers as professionals. Yet such intercorporate immobility also is critical for getting HREs to identify with the goals of a particular organization. What our results show is simply that, for this sample, the professional effect of immobility outweighs the organizational effect. Given other factors that influence the conflict between professional and organizational orientation, such need not always be the case.

Conclusion

In general, this sample reveals that the majority of HREs possess an academic training in their field, most are members of a professional association, and most believe that entry to the profession requires proper academic training that should be updated on a continual basis. All these criteria, follow the classical sociological definition of a "real profession" as distinct from a "non-professional" employment (Parsons, 1951). Nevertheless, the question regarding the granting of statutory control power to the professional association shows an interesting division among the respondents. It appears that even when HREs adhere to a set of ethical codes, they do not view them as moral codes that must guide their daily practice. Rather they view these codes as a set of ideals that members of the profession should try to attain. Thus the potential conflict between service to the profession and service to the organization can be tempered. Implicit in the findings of this paper is a view of the senior human resource executive as an 'ethical aide de camp' who is convinced that good ethics can be good business - but does not take this conviction as a moral imperative (Raelin, 1987). This point of view has been articulated repeatedly in the studies of the ethical behavior of corporate managers. They personally share the social values of the rest of society, but

their interpretations of the ethical implications of these values are shaped by their personal need to function effectively within their organizations, which in turn means conforming to the prevailing corporate culture. In such a context, the ethical positions of HREs come to reflect to business needs even when they conflict with moral positions that those outside the organization might derive from the same ethical posture.

These generalizations in themselves need to be tempered by our specific findings that suggest that professionalism in Human Resource Management is a two-dimensional construct, each of which reflects an executive with different personal characteristics. While neither of these dimensions revealed a significant relation to strategic influence, the characteristics that were statistically significant suggested that the most educated and the best-paid HREs are most comfortable with a professional orientation, and that younger and less well-paid HREs adopt an organizational orientation.

These two different orientations may reflect varied patterns of conduct in the attempt to solve conflicts in as HRM becomes increasingly integrated into strategic decision-making. While the more educated professionals would most likely manifest stiffer resistance when asked to trade-off autonomy and discretion for business needs, the other type of HRE may interpret his or her professional role to be first and foremost as a manager. In other words, as already indicated, different types of people with different types of experiences may have different interpretations about what a professional is. In particular, HREs with less experience may resolve the dilemma of maintaining a professional orientation while adapting to organizational strategic needs by simply rationalizing organizational needs as constituting professionalism. It appears, however, that such rationalization of one's role orientation deters HREs from gaining influence in the organization over time. While neither orientation has been found to be directly linked to gaining strategic influence, an understanding of how the two orientations complement or conflict with one another provides a broad framework for analyzing the emerging roles for senior HREs in corporate environments.

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