



## Cultural Steward – New Role for HR

Dr. Sowmya C S

Associate Professor, Department of HR, Welingkar Institute of Management No. 102 & 103, Electronic City Phase-1, Hosur Road, Bangalore, INDIA

Corresponding Author: sowmya.sathya@welingkar.org

### ABSTRACT

In today's volatile and uncertain world, there is a need for HR function to be more innovative as well strategic in nature. A new aspect of Strategic HR is for HR to be a Cultural Steward. HR can definitely support, enable and add immense value to the company by being an internal as well as an external cultural steward.

**Keywords--** Cultural Steward, HR, Strategic HR, Internal Cultural Steward, External Cultural Steward

### I. INTRODUCTION

There is a quote which says, "For, what is a family without a steward, a ship without a pilot, a flock without a shepherd, a body without a head, the same, I think, is a kingdom without the health and safety of a good monarch". The same quote can be extended to say, "For, what is an organization without a cultural steward". The cultural steward in this case is the HR professional. David Ulrich, Professor of Business at the Ross School of Business, University of Michigan and co-founder of RBL group, proposes six competencies for HR professionals if they need to add value to their organization. One of them is being a cultural steward. More specifically being an internal cultural steward for the organization. By this, the HR helps in not only shaping the culture of the company but also in helping the employees to understand that culture. Sometimes with multiple generations working together in the same company, the internal cultural steward helps in recognizing these differences and in enabling employees to adjust to it amicably. As an internal cultural steward, HR also encourages open, frank discussions when conflict arises or when the organization goes through a change.

### II. HR AS AN INTERNAL CULTURAL STEWARD

A company culture is like the personality of the company. It is the heart of the business and the employees are the source of it. It impacts productivity, morale, engagement and the character of the organization. For HR, it is vital to understand how culture has an influence on the bottom line.

HR plays an important role in setting the cultural atmosphere of the organization. Employees and the various departments in the organization take guidance from this and create a positive work culture. It is reflected in the work style, work interaction, how employees are treated, and how we interact with customers. The visual and verbal components of an organization's culture are noticeable every day at work. E.g. – when an employee is in a work area, canteen or office. Culture is represented in the organization's language, decision making, symbols and stories.

Every organization has its own matrix of what is agreed upon its terms of thoughts, actions and behavior. It is this matrix that creates a high performing culture in the company. It is the responsibility of HR to drive, manage and sustain the culture. HR also needs to work with the leadership team to make the necessary impact in the company. Influencing the leadership team to propel the culture in the direction required and to create a happy place to work is where HR needs to add value. But the biggest challenge for HR is to get every employee to sustain the culture created.

A good work culture which is results driven is always designed. That comes from the synergy between the leadership and the HR. Once the culture is designed, all practices must be aligned to that culture. Some areas where culture relates with HR are recruitment, onboarding, and retention.

From a recruitment perspective, a good culture at work increases the chances of getting good hires mainly through employee referrals. The more effort HR puts in the onboarding experience; the more employees feel that they are already part of the company. Again if the organization has a good culture, the organization will not have to make efforts in retaining employees, because they would feel wanted.

### III. HOW CAN HR WORK TOWARDS CREATING CULTURE?

One of the starting points is to assess the current organisational culture. This could be done by conducting surveys of employees, organising focus group discussions and also one on one interviews. It will also help to review the current industry practises and customer experiences. Also HR needs to take into account the history of the organisation.

Once this is done, a decision could be taken on whether cultural change is needed or not. If change is needed, HR can work with the leadership team and work on creating the desired culture for the organisation.

The key to all this revolves around some important focus areas.

1. Communication with all the concerned stakeholders is important not only to assess culture but also bring in, if required a desirable culture.
2. Identifying people who exhibit the right behaviors consistent with the culture and rewarding them reinforces the importance of sustaining the culture in the organization.
3. Induction program is a good opportunity for the organization to showcase their culture and also to narrate incidents / stories about the founders/leaders.
4. All platforms of interaction – meeting, training etc. can be an opportunity to communicate the cultural message. Even all celebration and fun events can promote the message.
5. HR can enlist the support of managers and leaders who are also the torch bearers of the culture and who can coach / mentor their team accordingly.

HR can transform the organization culture by being a champion. For that they also need to be culturally competent. They need to drive an all-inclusive culture which will also have an impact on the success of the organization. And research has shown that an all-inclusive culture leads to more innovation, engagement and increased revenue. One also needs to understand that culture has no specific boundary as such. It is a force that impacts team work, decision making, reward strategy etc. Understanding the current state of culture and aligning systems to reach the desired culture is where the

contribution of HR comes in. Mid-level employees are also critical to sustaining the culture of the organization. All companies must have culture champions who are role models in the right cultural behavior.

HR must also be a coach to the leaders, managers and employees, facilitate conversations with them and encourage them to own the desired culture. Today with increasing evidence based management, it is easy for HR to analyze the return on investment in culture initiatives. Workforce trends are making culture management and its sustenance very challenging. Digital transformation, increased competition, war for talent are some drivers for culture change in the organization.

But in today's world, ruled by technology it is not enough for HR to be just an internal cultural steward.

Globalization, Glocalization, operating in multicultural environments and technology demands that HR also has to play the role of being an external cultural steward too.

### IV. WHAT IS BEING AN EXTERNAL CULTURAL STEWARD?

Most technology companies today are operating in multi-cultural environments. But they are also realizing that they need to play by a new set of rules. And these rules are not for just one country. About 50 countries have passed laws and the main objective of these laws are to secure control over how their citizens use the internet. Governments today feel that there is an invasion by technology companies on their authority of communication.

China blocked Facebook in 2009 and in Europe, Facebook's bid to gather data from its apps and third party websites has been rejected by the Government. German privacy officials ordered Whatsapp to stop passing data of its 36 million users to Facebook. Facebook's Europe plans is in dormant state. In 2017, Vietnam police arrested a computer engineer because of a poem he wrote on Facebook criticizing his government. The poem was called "Mother's Lullaby," which criticized how the communist country was run. One of the lines was about how even after a century has gone by, people are still poor and hungry. As a consequence of this, Facebook had to remove information that was against the laws of the country.

For all these technology companies every populous country means adding another million/billion set of customers to its business.

This is where HR as an external cultural steward comes in to mitigate the tensions that arise between the technology companies' ambitions and the cultural environment where they operate.

Of course, today companies have their own Global Policy Management team to take care of issues like this. But with increasing touch, presence and impact of

technology companies in almost all countries of the world, HR needs to take on the role of being an external cultural steward for their own organization.

The role is not limited to just this aspect. In the book, "Pichai" by Jagmohan S Bhanver, the analysis of Google adventure in China and moving out from there has been attributed to not understanding the cultural nuances of the market before they venture into it. HR as an external cultural steward need to play a vital role here, in helping organizations to understand the culture of the country they operate it and help strengthen relationships between businesses and government. Infact, every organization can have an HR envoy for cultural affairs in every country the company operates.

## V. CONCLUSION

In short the role of an HR external cultural steward will revolve around (1) to understand the cultural

milieu of the country they operate in and help foster relationships between businesses and government (2) to help reduce the tensions that arises between companies' ambitions and the cultural environment where they operate (3) to help reduce the challenges of cultural distance for companies in their efforts to grow new markets (4) to create new communication channels with government. Obviously, new skills are needed for today's business environment and HR can definitely support, enable and add immense value to the company by being an internal as well as an external cultural steward.

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