

What is HR Leadership? A Twenty-First Century Perspective

E. Abby Wells
Alvernia University

Abstract

Many writers and academics often refer to great HR professionals as leaders; however, very little has been written about HR leadership. The purpose of this paper is to operationalize HR leadership using a broader perspective that includes 'leading from the heart.' It will be suggested that if leaders are a reflection of the context in which they exist, understanding HR leadership must start with a closer look at significant trends in the HR profession. One of the main points in the paper draws attention to the problem with the literature--in that, much attention is given to what HR leaders do, instead of who HR leaders are, in a time where "who you are is just as important as what you do" (Greenberg, 2012, p.1).

Many writers and academics often refer to great human resource (HR) professionals as leaders; however, very little has been written about HR leadership. Perhaps this is because, as suggested by one author on the subject, the very notion of HR professionals operating as leaders is still a relatively new insight (Holbeche, 2010). Indeed, many top level HR professionals continue to fight for a seat at the table where decisions affecting their organization's success are made.

What has impeded the conceptual development of leadership in the HR profession? If leaders are in fact a reflection of the context and era in which they exist or emerge, advancing HR leadership must start with a closer look at significant trends in the evolution of the HR profession. Considering such, this paper intends to enhance the understanding of HR leadership by operationalizing the term and elucidating how to identify the HR leader in the present moment and time.

Thanks in large part to the work of Libby Sartain and Martha Finney (2003) and other writers on 'leading from the heart' (Blanchard, 1999; Hoppe, 2005; Thakadipuram, 2010; Bolman & Deal, 1995; Greenberg, 2012; Fry, 2003), this paper offers a broader perspective of HR leadership that is embedded in the foundations of human spirituality. The role of discernment in terms of knowing and becoming who you are, will be explored as the key attribute of wisdom that characterizes twenty-first century HR leadership. It will be suggested that the main problem with the literature today is that much attention is given to *what* HR leaders *do*, instead of *who* great HR professionals *are*, in a time where "who you are [as a leader] is just as important as what you do" (Greenberg, 2012, p.1).

The first section of this paper deals with the definition of HR leadership. In the second section, which concerns the HR profession, current trends and implications for leadership are explored. The third section considers the relationship between HR leadership and spirituality. This section includes a number of subtopics related to the role of discernment in HR practice. The fourth section examines how to identify the HR leader. And the fifth section concludes the paper.

Definition of HR Leadership

Commentaries on HR leadership often point to top leaders in the field who have the perceived credibility and experience necessary to articulate, in some form or fashion, what makes a great HR professional (Holbeche, 2010; Sartain & Finney, 2003; Thakadipuram, 2010). Oftentimes these leaders are referred to as thought, opinion, and/or practice leaders (Sartain & Finney, 2003; Schiffbauer, O'Brien, Timmons & Kiarie, 2008; Holbeche, 2010), which suggest that a significant part of HR leadership is earning a reputation for being an exemplary, original thinker (and, of course, doer).

Holbeche (2010) explores the leadership narratives of notable HR leaders but rejects the normative view that HR leadership requires the occupation of top HR roles. Instead, Holbeche (2010) posits that HR leadership happens at all levels and is as much a mindset as it is a function. Insights from Holbeche's (2010) work points to two key assertions about HR leadership: 1) the mark of a great HR leader, as stated by one HR participant, is "being as un-HR like as possible" (p. 42), and 2) HR leadership involves ensuring the sustainability of organizations.

Traditionally, leadership in HR has been considered synonymous with strategy. In fact, many HR professionals use the term 'leadership' interchangeably with strategic 'people management' (O'Neil, 2008; Society of Human Resource Management "SHRM", 2002). Should HR leadership, however, be restricted to the intellectual capacity and competence of the mind? In other words, do HR leaders also function in "the spiritual realm of the heart" (Hoppe, 2005, p.83)? If "the heart of leadership is in the hearts of leaders" as Bolman and Deal (1995) assert (p.11), HR leaders must also be 'heart leaders'--that is, they must "use their head but work from the heart" (Sartain & Finney, 2003, p. xvii).

As leaders across fields embody more holistic leadership approaches, HR leaders are not excluded among those who are "deeply concerned about the spiritual side of their leadership roles" (Harvey, 2001, p.378). Defining HR leadership, therefore, is more complex than simply describing what HR leaders do. For the purpose of this paper, a broader definition of HR leadership is adopted to include the spiritual dimensions of HR: the spirituality and practice of self-knowledge (authentic response to the lived experience of the human life) and facilitation of the success of people. Spirituality in this context refers to the spiritual nature of humankind--heart and soul--which, where application, may exclude or include the impact of religious practice on workplace experience.

The HR Profession and HR Leadership

Current trends in HR support this integration of the spiritual dimensions of human existence with the day-to-day lived experience of work. Ulrich, Younger, Brockbank, and Ulrich (2013) explain that in the past 16 years, the percentage of females in HR has more than doubled (from 30 percent to 62 percent). In addition, over 50 percent of HR professionals have either 15 or more years of experience, or 5 or less years of experience (Ulrich et al., 2013).

In the past six years, the profession has seen a decline in the percentage of HR professionals who are generalists (from 49 percent to 40 percent), and an increase in the percentage of professionals

specializing in organizational development, research, and effectiveness (from 6 percent to 11 percent) (Ulrich et al., 2013). In the same way that organizational change has accompanied the new century organization, so has the emphases on engaging the whole person in work, cultivated a more human workplace (Fry, 2003). The ‘feminization’ of the HR profession and the collaboration between seasoned and emerging HR professionals are positive steps in this new leadership direction (Ulrich et al., 2013).

Bourdreau and Ziskin (2011) argue that the future of HR leadership will involve an organizational shift from ‘hero leadership’ to ‘collective leadership.’ The new organization, therefore, “will view everyone as leaders, and people will have reinvigorated accountability and authority to act” (Bourdreau & Ziskin, 2011, p. 258). This description supports Holbeche’s (2010) point of disassociating HR leadership with rank or hierarchy, as mentioned in the previous section. Thus, HR leaders have the opportunity to participate in substantive change as co-authors in rewriting the narrative of effective organizational leadership (SHRM, 2002).

Another opportunity in the future of HR leadership is in the area of diversity and globalization. Pucik (1997) reports that if HR leaders embrace a global mindset, they have the capacity to gain entry into the borderless world of business partners as ‘global role models’ who link with and exchange leaders worldwide (p. 164). Consultants assert that the globalization of organizations calls for much more sophisticated HR approaches in terms of dealing with and capitalizing on differences in the workplace (SHRM, 2002). The spirituality of the human life and work, however, are universal attributes of this diversity.

HR Leadership and Spirituality

Hoppe (2005) defines spirituality as “the search for depth and meaning in our entire being” (p. 84). When this concept is applied to HR leadership, spirituality emerges as a major force or power that puts meaning into work. The integration of HR leadership and spirituality generates questions such as: Is this organization a good fit for me? How can I contribute to the success of others? Do I believe in this work? How can I do my best with what I already have? These questions create space for attributes of leadership “that use not only the head and the hands but also the heart” (Hoppe, 2005, p. 84). Thus, the concept of HR as a ‘calling’ is not foreign to many HR leaders who understand the role of discernment in making decisions that greatly affect, if not alter people’s lives (Sartain & Finney, 2003; Holbeche, 2010).

Knowing Who You Are

In the tradition of Ignatian spirituality, discernment involves detecting the difference between the conditions of the heart when moving towards or away from what is good (Ganss, 1991). Therefore, one of the roles of discernment in HR leadership is to help professionals discover the circumstances in which their capacity to lead is at its best--that is, when they are ‘leading from the heart’ (Sartain & Finney, 2003). The purpose of this inward journey, as Hoppe (2005) offers, is to gain confidence and trust in the truth and meaning of one’s life as a leader. In HR, knowing who you are is a critical aspect of professional development and finding a fulfilling place of work that invites leaders to become their true self (Sartain & Finney, 2003).

‘Becoming Who You Are’

Martin’s (2006) book on the true self explains, in layman’s terms, how and why people are more successful when they begin to accept what they already know about themselves. The book is an appropriate read for every undergraduate student, particularly those at Catholic institutions. The point here is that HR leadership is first about who we are, and second about what we do. The key assumption is that *doing* is an overflow of *becoming*. In this paper, HR leadership is defined as the spirituality and practice of self-knowledge and facilitation of the success of people. Freeing oneself to become the true self is a practice of such knowledge, which sets the stage for the facilitation of the success in others.

Virtuous Leadership

Facilitating the success in people and organizations depends on the unique ability of HR leaders to discern what is needed, and act accordingly (Sartain & Finney, 2003). In other words, HR leaders, unlike the position of conventional visionaries, must be active participants in bringing to life the visions they communicate. Recently, leadership scholars have taken a renewed interest in this dynamic, particularly in the area of virtuous leadership or ‘leader integrity’ (Gentry, et. al., 2013; Moorman, Darnold, & Priesemuth, 2013; Vogelgesang, Leroy, & Avolio, 2013; Bauman, 2013). New studies posit that follow-through adherence and morality have, in several instances, predicted either performance, unique variance of trust, or perceptions of leadership consistency and subsequent engagement (Gentry, et. al., 2013; Moorman, Darnold, & Priesemuth, 2013; Vogelgesang, Leroy, & Avolio, 2013).

These findings suggest that virtue in leadership does impact success outcomes. Bauman (2013) builds on this notion and highlights consistency as a virtue when applied to substantive integrity (commitment to moral, universal values that support human flourishing). Together, these studies demonstrate the need for increased integrity in leadership, particularly in communities such as the workplace where trust is king. Virtuous leadership and knowing and becoming who you are, are all qualities of the spiritual dimension of life. The next section will describe attributes of HR leadership that flow from this foundation.

Who are HR Leaders?

As previously indicated, twenty-first century HR leaders are leaders who embody a more holistic approach to leadership and take seriously the spiritual realm that impacts the lived experience of work. The attributes of virtuous leadership and knowing and becoming the true self can be credited to the role of discernment in the HR leader’s practice of exercising wisdom, not only to make pertinent decisions but also to remain connected to the ‘human’ side (less cerebral aspect) of work.

Thus, HR leaders can be identified by the following qualities: they keep good company (Sartain & Finney, 2003), are recognized by others as ‘having’ something special or unique (Holbeche, 2010;), are passionate about building from the ground up and helping others succeed (Sartain & Finney, 2003; Holbeche, 2010), have bold, unconventional convictions that people want to follow (Holbeche, 2010; Sartain & Finney, 2003), and are people of integrity who have an

exceptional capacity to persevere through difficult times (Bauman, 2013; Holbeche, 2010; Sartain & Finney, 2003). Notice, these are all qualities of *who* HR leaders *are*, not *what* HR leaders *do*. In sum, HR leaders are simply great people who know how to recognize other great people (Sartain & Finney, 2003), and with the help of other HR leaders can position themselves and other great people in the right places at the right times.

Is HR leadership, spiritual leadership? Not in this view. But, as Blanchard (1999) might say, HR leaders are spiritual beings who engage other spiritual beings in the meaningful experience of work. For Sartain and Finney (2003), this means that HR leaders are mission driven people, and not particularly for the purpose of HR but rather for the purpose of being fully the people they are called to be.

Conclusion

Considering this, it is no surprise that HR leaders are recruited from all types of fields and come from all sorts of professional backgrounds (Holbeche, 2010). This is why the literature must shift the focus from what HR leaders do in terms of HR competencies, to who HR leaders are in terms of spirituality (heart and spirit). What makes an HR leader, starts from the inside and works its way outward. In other words, HR leadership is first about who we are, and second about what we do. Indeed, rank and hierarchy in the profession do not alone explain these attributes of HR leader success.

The purpose of this paper was to enhance the understanding of HR leadership by attempting to operationalize the term and explain how to recognize twenty-first century HR leaders. There are two main points of the paper: 1) the problem with the HR literature is that leadership is largely examined from the limited perspective of what HR leaders do as opposed to who HR leaders are, and 2) the solution to this problem is found in our consideration of the ways in which leadership is reflected in the context of the times, which supports the notion that twenty-first century HR leadership is much more embedded in the foundations of human spirituality now than ever before.

The first section of the paper dealt with the definition of HR leadership, followed by the second section on trends and leadership in the HR profession. In the third section, the relationship between HR leadership and spirituality was considered, and included aspects of discernment in HR practice. The fourth section examined how to identify the twenty-first century HR leader.

The question that remains unanswered, as mentioned in the introduction, is what has impeded the conceptual development of leadership in the HR profession? More research is needed in terms of developing HR leadership theories that adequately address the mind and heart functions of the field. It is suggested that much of this work be conducted by leadership scholars who are well equipped to bridge the gaps between theory and the spirituality and practice of self-knowledge and facilitation of the success of people.

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