

# HR – meat in the sandwich

**T**alk to any senior HR practitioner and one of their key roles is “working with the top team”. What that means and whether HR gets the credit it deserves for this enabling function, is the focus for this month’s Instep.

Anyone who thinks that being the head of HR for a large headcount business is an easy gig, is probably blissfully ignorant of the many roles that are played by HR. One of the most important focuses of any HRD is the countless conversations and activities that are had with members of the top team to keep them operating as a “team” as well as playing the role of coach and confidante to the business leader and dealing with external stakeholders.

## Meat in the sandwich version no 1 – “the management team”

HR leaders are generally central to an organisation being able to achieve cooperation and consistency at the top team level, reinforcing the direction of the business and playing a central role in the development and role modelling of leadership behaviours.

This is all great when the business is humming along, but what happens when someone in the leadership team falls out of the boat? Occasionally executive teams “blow up”, and if the organisation is high profile enough, this will be played out in the business media with potential impacts on investor confidence. This is truly when the role of the HR leader as a mediator and facilitator comes to the fore.

Who will ever be able to tell how many times the super egos on management teams across Australia are placated by the role that HR leaders play and when will HR get the credit it deserves for this role? Typically, surveys get pumped out, criticising the HR function for not being commercial enough, etc etc. But these surveys never ask about HR’s value at critical times in keeping management teams in balance and operating as a “team”.

## Meat in the sandwich version no 2 – “external stakeholders”

Top level HR practitioners are often in a position to mediate, facilitate or just generally develop communications between the divergent views of a board and the CEO/MD.

A HR leader of a very high profile blue chip was reminded of

the challenges that are sometimes offered to HR practitioners. This person played the role of an independent player in a breakdown of communications between the owner’s representatives and the CEO. Without losing the confidence of the business leaders, this HR leader was required for a period of time, through various ownership wrangling plays, to remain an independent and objective liaison point to all parties. Complex, to say the least.

In a further example of HR being the “meat in the sandwich”, another HR practitioner described the challenge of being asked by the company’s offshore group office to undertake an investigation of the local MD and the sales director. Drama aplenty and HR was right in the thick of it. With the CFO, the HR leader was subsequently required to run the company on an interim basis whilst trying to maintain some stability in the company’s day-to-day operation and revenue generation. Whilst this was an extreme example, HR is often required to step up to the plate at difficult times within management teams.

## The balancing act

Playing a central facilitating role in a senior management team is a balancing act. Ask any senior HR leader and they will say that a key to their success in this balancing act and it is based on their senior management team perceiving them to be trustworthy, 110% confidential and not political.

Being politically aware and street smart without actually being political, is a true high order capability. The right intervention, at the right time, is all about judgment and experience. Many HR leaders will say that developing this capability is a key need for any developing HR practitioner.

There are a number of distinct models of HR practitioner that result when the balancing act fails. Some of these models include the following :

- » The Dark Prince – the most dangerous model – political, playing people off against each other, HR’s dark side released
- » The MD’s loyal lieutenant – just taking orders wasn’t a mitigating defense at Nuremburg and it shouldn’t be for HR
- » The Diplomat (sometimes called the Henry Kissinger model) – rarely seen, probably lost in a world of frequent flyer points, the Henry Kissinger stays at such a high level that nothing happens which can, in itself, create damage (if nothing else, for HR’s reputation)
- » The Social Worker or the “once was HR model” – tea, tissues and an open door, those were the days!

Executive teams are by definition full of high achievers who are under pressure from their CEO/MD and the market to continue to overachieve. A HRD’s role to assist the top team to act as a leadership team is critical. The question is, does the HR function get credit for this and get remunerated accordingly? Probably not, but developing this capability is still essential for any aspiring HRD’s of the future.

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