My **Journey** to the **Center of HR**

By Richard Wilkinson

"Human resources practices do not impact the culture of an institution; they are the culture." – Peter Block in the book Stewardship

What principles underpin HR practices? From what wellsprings of thought do we draw the certainty for what we do? What ultimately is the purpose of our work? My journey to unearth these answers began in 1995, when I returned to school to study organization development. At that time I was already certified as an SPHR, had a master's degree and had been serving for 10 years as the HR director for the City of Redmond, Washington. School called to me as a means to reenergize and reimagine my career.

In 1997, toward the end of the academic program, I heard Dr. Margaret Wheatley, author of the popular book Leadership and the New Science, speak at an event. She posed the question, "What is the covenant promise your group makes to the organization as a whole?" In other words, for what fundamental purpose was human resources created? Despite my experience and credentials to date, I had yet to develop a succinct and convincing answer to that question.

Wheatley's question sent me on an internal voyage. First, I mulled what core principles informed HR practices. In my view, there are four: HR as catalyst, HR as cultural architect, HR as relationship builder and HR as the heart of the organization. Let's take a closer look.

Principle #1 — HR as Catalyst
We can be a catalyst for an organization's success through our focused attention on people and people issues.

How many studies do we need to validate the principle that people matter? At least as far back as the 1952 study of management practices in the Yorkshire mines we have known that people-centered practices yield the most productive outcomes. Fast forward to 2013 and Liz Wiseman's The Multiplier Effect. Same findings. Empowering practices yield productive outcomes at the rate of more than twice that of traditional, control-oriented approaches.

Consider further the multiplicity of practices where HR is (or can be) a catalyst for organizational success: sourcing talented candidates, facilitating effective selection and onboarding, encouraging management excellence, keeping compensation competitive, supporting employee growth and championing betterment of the organization. In all these ways HR practices pervade organizational life. The clarity and energy with which HR drives integration of these practices into the day-to-day workings of the organization has much to do with the impact we have.

Principle #2 — HR as Cultural Architect
We create an organization's culture through the people we hire, the policies we adopt, the decisions we make and the practices we follow. Employees embody the culture.

The premise behind this principle is simply that our decisions matter and have far-reaching ripple effects. Early in my graduate studies I realized that organizations are expressions of our collective imagination, for better or worse. Thus, the integrity and intentionality we bring to the kind of organization we are striving to create, that we exemplify in our day-to-day and long-term strategic HR work, is a product of many choices; but these are choices nonetheless, not inevitabilities.

Principle #3 — HR as Relationship Builder
We build and nurture relationships.

Relationships and relationship building are the sine qua non of HR. I was emboldened to this principle by Wheatley's writing. In Leadership and the New Science, she wrote, "The participatory nature of reality has required scientists to focus their attention on relationships. No one can contemplate a system's view of life without becoming engrossed in relational dynamics. Nothing exists independent of its relationships, whether looking at subatomic particles or human affairs."

Principle #4 — HR as Heart of the Organization
We embody courage, compassion and commitment.

Courage is needed to face squarely the multiplicity of challenges we encounter, both large and small, individual and system-wide. How willing are we to speak truth to power? To advocate for change when change is needed? Courage and imagination are needed to consider creative solutions to organizational practices and cultural conundrums. We must often draw on our courage in order to communicate with others information they may not wish to hear.

We need compassion to appreciate another's reality so that we can make more informed decisions. HR is such personal work. Wouldn't you want an HR business partner who's compassionate? Author and consultant Peter Block has this to say about HR: "We have 'human' in our name. We should take that seriously. We have to provide an alternative voice to the one that argues for control and consistency. Our function is to stand for the restoration of humanity in the systems world."

Our reliability manifests our commitment. In the end, can others count on us to deliver on our promises, to balance individual and organizational interests, and to do so with integrity and empathy?

The Purpose of HR

No sooner had I satisfied myself with the four principles essential to HR than I was compelled to ask what lay at the intersection of these four principles. In the four-box model in my mind, what was at its center? What bedrock supported the principles? What was our purpose? Here's where my thinking led me. HR's ultimate purpose is to build positive, productive organizations. All our endeavors must be directed toward this central aim — to create organizations where the human spirit thrives in furtherance of the mission. Shouldering HR with the responsibility of building positive, productive workplaces is a big leap from more conventional perspectives of HR's purpose. Yet, whether you buy this view of HR's purpose or not, and regardless of our understanding of the fundamental nature of our work, what we pursue and how we pursue it has enormous consequences for our institutions and their employees.

However, I resist defining "positive" too narrowly. I want others to find room to expand on the word in their own way. The word "positive" has a certain elasticity to it, yet suggests an optimistic trajectory. For me, "positive" synthesized in a single word my take on organization development as intentional, collaborative efforts to make the workplace better — that is, more humane, more productive and more resilient.

In this view, all HR professionals are, or can be, organization development practitioners. Over time my thinking about the meaning of "positive" has gravitated

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toward the notion of healthy workplaces — ones that are energetic, synergistic, empathetic, conflict-positive and trusting. Still, seeing the essence of HR as building positive, productive workplaces has served me well in grounding my HR/OD practice on a meaningful foundation.

My motivation to share my principles and purpose of HR was prompted recently upon reading a former colleague's book, *Reclaiming the Soul of Human Resources*. The author, Cathy Raymond, published the book in 2011, shortly after retiring from her position as the HR director for the City of Olympia (Washington). Raymond writes, "Human resources exists to nurture and protect the human spirit.

Everything we do — decisions we make, policies we write, contracts we negotiate, class and pay studies we conduct — all should be directed toward supporting and developing employees, so they can achieve their personal and professional best."

When I read this it rekindled my belief in the strong organization development lens through which I view the work of HR. When I consider the objectives of so much of HR's most constructive initiatives, whether it's employee engagement, great places to work, retention, talent management, principled negotiations, being an employer-of-choice, leadership development or strategic partnerships, we in HR are striving to create the conditions that unleash the talents of employees so that their best selves flourish in pursuit of the institution's mission. We advocate, coach and train managers toward practices that foster employee growth and away from those that restrain performance.

In the end, I believe Raymond's view is spot on — that HR is spirit work, and that we are about fostering hope and resourcefulness, about helping make memorable our collective journey at work. And it is when we in HR embrace our purpose to build positive, productive organizations, to be a catalyst for success and a cultural architect, that we can lift the human spirit and in that way create organizations where we would want our children to work, where energy is unleashed, and where ingenuity is at play each and every day.

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