

Transforming Your HR Workforce: Paper-Pusher to Strategic Adviser

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

The Bad Old Days

My first exposure to government in the late 1970s gave me a jaundiced and unfortunate view of public sector human capital management. At least, in the agency where I



worked, “personnel” was not viewed as a value-added organization. The HR culture was rules-based and compliance-oriented, the people were perceived as archetypical bureaucrats, mysteriously and painfully slowly moving papers from one desk to another, to no apparent purpose, and without any ending. Among those of us in the agency’s program-oriented offices, the conventional wisdom view was that personnel was populated by untalented people who could not successfully perform in a programmatic function. “Why else would they be in personnel?” was the common and regrettable view.

New Possibilities

A number of years later, in the late 1990s, I found myself having my first private sector work experience. Although I was not working in the HR function at the time, I was in the chain of command that reported up to the company’s senior vice president for human resources. Being involved in all of this executive’s staff meetings, it became obvious to me very quickly that HR was viewed as an absolutely critical function in the company. Whenever there was an important strategic business decision to be made, there would always be three people who had a seat at the table: the CEO, the CFO, and the senior VP for HR. Clearly, my company’s CEO thought of our senior VP and his HR function as an absolutely essential strategic business advisor. They were not bureaucrats; they

were people whose success or failure would mean success or failure for the company as a whole. The contrast with the way personnel was viewed in government could not have been starker. This disparity in roles and perception stimulated me to ask myself how HR might evolve to a position of similar status and perceived value in government.

Over the last 10 to 20 years, several trends have worked together to help elevate the role of HR in government. First, technological improvement made it possible to automate processes and reduce the number of steps of many HR activities. This meant that fewer people in the HR function could do more work, and the nature of their work would be much more transparent, since the systems could report performance information on timeliness, and it was always clear who was responsible for performing the next action in the sequence of the process. Second, the 1990s and first decade of the 21st century were a period of experimentation in governmental administration, across the federal, state and local levels. There was great emphasis on customer service, a results-orientation, on the ability to innovate. Old assumptions about what was “normal” in government were being challenged across the board. Senior government officials, often political appointees with private sector experience, began to assume and express new expectations for their human resources functions. Among these expectations was that HR should have a more balanced customer service and outcomes focus, rather than having a disproportionate focus on compliance and outputs.

These patterns were by no means universal or uniform across the country. The pace of these evolutionary changes in attitude varied dramatically from one part of the country to another, often even from one agency to another inside the same government.

Transform Now

The transformation of the HR function continues, but has somewhat and perhaps unavoidably stalled in the last few years as state and local governments in particular have faced severe fiscal problems, often compelling HR leaders to make hard decisions about what level of service to provide and about which services to curtail entirely or scale back significantly. This has often generated something of a bunker mentality, causing HR executives to feel they need to hunker down, focus on the basics and deal with situations where it is a struggle to simply provide basic services.

In the last nine months, since the November 2010 Congressional election, a climate of unprecedented austerity has begun to take form in the federal government as well. For the first time in the professional memories of the governmental workforce, federal HR officials are feeling the pressure that their state and local counterparts have endured cyclically for decades. That new reality is reflected in job loss statistics. In August 2011, of the 18,000 government job cuts, for the first time in years, federal government job losses outnumbered jobs that were eliminated at the state and local government levels.

As philosophers have observed for millennia, every challenge is an opportunity; every crisis sets the stage for a transformation that can lead to a better, higher state of being and self-awareness. That’s all very nice, the reader may observe, but now what do we do in the real world?

I suggest that this is precisely the time that HR leaders across all levels of government should seize the opportunity to do strategic planning for their own HR workforce, and take small but highly strategic steps that set the trajectory for reshaping the HR workforce.

The recession-triggered staffing cuts at the state and local government levels

have no doubt been felt in the HR workforce, and hit them perhaps disproportionately heavily as elected and appointed officials have struggled to protect jobs that are perceived as contributing more directly to citizen service. While the massive federal grant programs associated with the federal American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009 temporarily buffered job cuts at the state and local levels, that funding has now largely run out. Indeed, recent Department of Labor reports indicate that state and local governments are cutting more jobs even as the private sector economy has shown signs of a painfully slow recovery in job growth. All told, more than 105,000 government jobs were eliminated in the first eight months of 2011. If HR executives do find themselves having to deal with a new round of job cuts within their own organizations, this is the right time to think strategically about what sort of HR skills sets they want to have on board when state and local tax revenues finally do rebound, and the agency can begin to rebuild. By attempting to provide carefully targeted retirement incentives, such as early retirement options or buyouts, an HR manager may be able to hold onto those employees, regardless of seniority, who may be expected to contribute the most value when the government is in a fiscal situation that allows rebuilding staffing levels.

The analysis around what skill sets will then be desirable should include an evaluation of whether there is information technology that could be pursued to enable the HR workforce to be more efficient, or to relieve it of process-heavy work of limited strategic value. This is also the time to think about HR-related performance metrics, especially for the process-intensive work. One should evaluate how much more productivity could be gained and labor cost reduced through the application of technology, and compare that to the cost of the technology itself. The best time to analyze these options is when the workforce is lean, so one does not have to disrupt the jobs and workflows of large numbers of people.

The period before tax revenues rebound and hiring can resume is also the right

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time to consider business process reengineering of HR functions. One should resist the natural inclination to rebuild the HR system to resemble what it looked like before the budget reductions, but instead ask oneself the question, “How would I structure this organization if I had the chance to create it from a blank slate?” There may be opportunities to consolidate servicing personnel offices, to centralize some functions or distribute others, to increase efficiency, effectiveness, or both.

For those core HR employees you intend to be part of the future HR workforce, explore what training might be most

helpful to them so they can contribute the greatest value. While it may not be possible to fund this training immediately, it would be advantageous to identify what would be desirable in advance, so that when training budgets do begin to be restored you are poised to quickly take advantage of the opportunity. In this way, your HR staff will be better positioned to add value relatively quickly.

Finally, as the last step as you prepare to reshape your HR workforce and bring it to a new level of performance in a post-recessionary environment, create a staff acquisition plan. Think about the vacancy announcements that you would use to recruit the employees with the targeted skills that you will want to fill out your HR workforce of the future.

If you are able to lay out a strategic plan for your future HR function and take some tangible steps to position yourself to rapidly implement that plan when the opportunity presents itself, then you will be well on your way to showcasing your HR organization as the trusted business adviser that your appointed and elected leadership will expect and deserve.

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