

Transforming HR and IT from “Wayward Children” to Drivers of Business Success

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

It is my belief that sound human resource (HR) and information technology (IT) practices are capable of driving organizational success. Yet my observation and experience indicate that far too many HR and IT departments do not even come close to realizing this capability. To the contrary, both areas often are viewed internally as obstacles to individual and organizational success that divert scarce resources from areas that do the “real” work.

My contention is that organization executives enable mediocre performance by failing to challenge HR and IT to live up to their respective potential. Actively and passively, intentionally and unintentionally, consciously and unconsciously, they enable behavior and results that they refuse to accept from other functional areas. Though others, including HR and IT professionals and academics, certainly can “claim” a share of the blame, the top decision-makers are the ones who consistently have tolerated behavior and results that fall far short of the mark.

I can make the case that HR personally touches every individual in the organization. As a result, the HR function is uniquely positioned to direct employee performance toward organizational goals. Yet how often does this happen? Instead we see, experience, and/or read about evidence of poor or mediocre performance such as dysfunctional turnover, low morale, low productivity, dissatisfied customers, disengaged employees, inability to achieve desired goals and outcomes, mis-matched talents and job requirements,

employment-related lawsuits, dysfunctional behaviors, and managers who spend an inordinate amount of time resolving conflicts. With “results” like these, is it any wonder that HR is viewed with disdain by many?

Similarly, I can make the case that the work done by IT departments can or does affect all areas of an organization. Given the potential for technology to increase productivity and profitability by making processes and systems more effective and efficient, IT seems a logical choice when searching for ways to achieve organizational goals. Yet one sees the same kind of complaints from CIOs as one does from HR executives - i.e., decision-makers at all levels fail to take us seriously, they don't understand the value that we can bring to the organization, they see us as obstacles instead of valued enablers, they are missing the boat by shutting us out of important decisions, especially at strategic levels. **Why the sharp discrepancy between the promise and the reality of HR's and IT's contributions to organizational success?**

The analogy that comes to mind is that of wayward youths whose failure to live up to their potential begins with a lack of, or ineffective, parental control and guidance. This lack of direction and development enables the youths to squander their talents and pick up bad habits. Perhaps expectations were not made clear or were set very low. Perhaps there were no consequences for aberrant behavior or the parents found it too much trouble to confront and

correct the bad behaviors, or they didn't know how to address them. Perhaps the behaviors were explained away or otherwise tolerated. Perhaps the parents were too busy to pay attention to the children or figured it was someone else's job – e.g., the teachers at school – to provide boundaries and discipline. Perhaps it was easier for them to throw up their hands and concede defeat, labeling the children as “high spirited,” for example, or saying, “That's just how they are” than to insist on alternative productive behaviors. Or perhaps there was some guidance about behavior, but because it subsequently was not reinforced or rewarded, the children reverted to old habits. Returning someone to the same environment that gave rise to, and supported, the bad behaviors dooms the wayward youths to failure. Why is it so surprising, then, that the wayward youths grow up to be wayward adults?

Similarly, why are people surprised to find that HR and IT are behaving as wayward children, given that they essentially have been “raised” that way? Consider whether any of these alternative ways of managing or viewing HR and IT sound familiar: treated as second-class citizens rather than as valued contributors; assigned very narrow areas of responsibility (e.g., compliance and administration) rather than allowed to develop their respective talents; freed of accountability rather than required to demonstrate their respective value; viewed and treated as cost centers instead of as investments in business success; left to their own devices instead of being given clear performance expectations; shut out from business strategy discussions and decisions rather than sought out for their creativity and innovation.

For the same reasons that talented children go astray, HR and IT departments fail to live up to their potential. Here are just a few suggestions of ways that executives can stop enabling HR's and IT's mediocre performance and start challenging these areas to live up to their respective potential as drivers of business success:

- Provide effective guidance, direction, and support from the executive level
- Establish and communicate clear expectations for HR and IT professionals
- Identify clear, measurable pictures of “success”
- Provide the necessary tools for successful outcomes
- Hold HR and IT accountable for achieving the stated outcomes
- Provide and enforce consequences for non-performance
- Re-define the roles of HR and IT to highlight their contributions to organizational success

The last point is particularly important. Just as wayward youths are doomed to failure unless their environment changes to support desired behaviors and results, so too HR and IT efforts would fail if nothing else changed – e.g., the business environment, executives' attitudes, expectations about their performance. There must be accountability on *all* sides. Executives must relate differently to HR and IT than before – i.e., re-define the relationship and learn how to interact differently. Just as the parents of the wayward youths threw up their hands in self-proclaimed defeat, too many executives have given up on HR and IT without a fight, essentially providing those areas with a free pass or “permission” to be wayward and not accountable.

What actions will you take today to stop wayward behaviors in your organization and support business success? →

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