

Gone is the Corporate Doberman

Don't let others' old images of human resources as "paper-pushing personnel people" impede your performance. Defining the HR role and its purpose can improve results and enhance the image of the HR professional.

By JILL E. JANOV

Whenver I see human resource professionals congregating, I am reminded of a group of actors responding to a casting call. They all may be able to read lines expertly, but the one who performs best is the one who understands the character's role in the play. If we look at organizations as plays to be cast, we find that some are dramas and some are comedies, but all consist of roles that must be filled. What is the role of the human resource professional? Why do HR professionals often feel they do not receive the proper recognition for their efforts? Why do they sense that an invisible curtain hangs between them and the organizations they serve?

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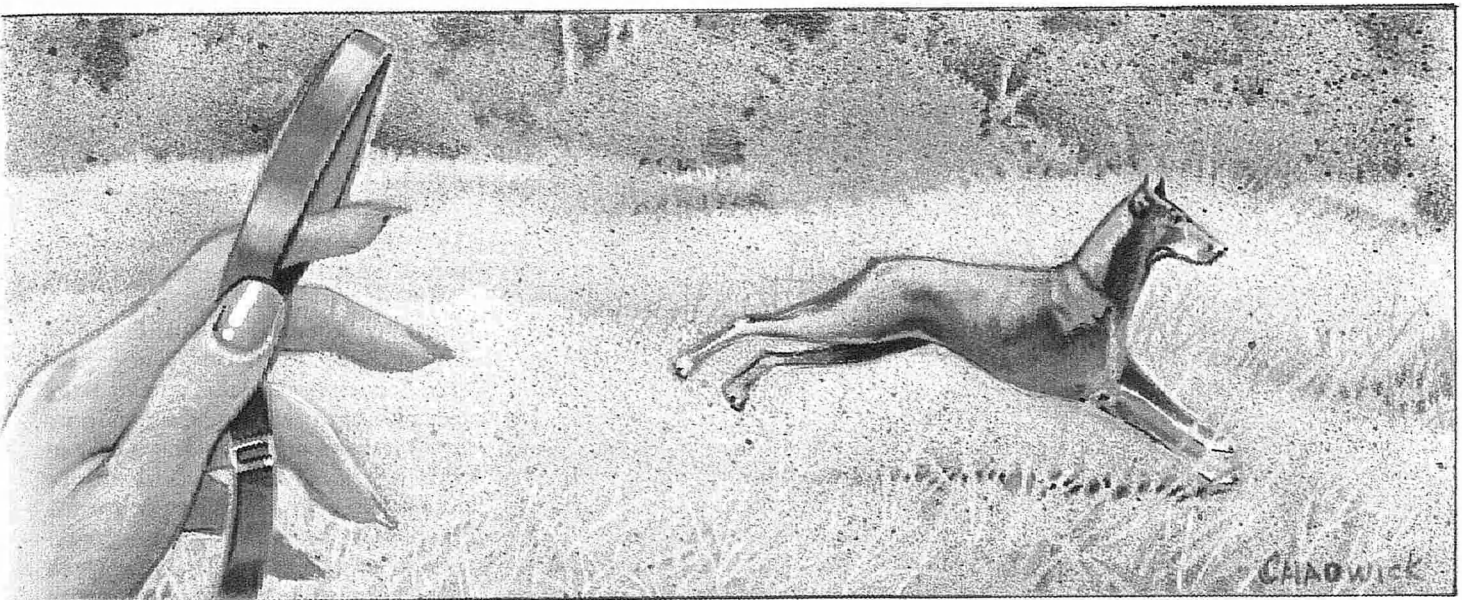
A powerless past

Tracing the origins of the personnel function provides clues to understanding the confusion surrounding the HR professional's role. At one time, personnel served as the elephant burial ground in an organization. Whenever a member of management ceased to function effectively in a line job, the word was, "Put him in personnel, he can't do any harm there." The implication was that "he couldn't do any good either." In its early incarnation, personnel was viewed as a necessary evil, a paper-shuffling, records-keeping function, a place where an organization housed its employee forms.

The first rebirth of personnel occurred in the early 1970s when the impact of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 finally reached organizations. Suddenly, management needed protection from charges of discrimination and ugly class action suits that

resulted in back-pay awards, training trusts and the general discomfort of operating with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs looking over organizational shoulders. Like a dog that has been kicked too long but still yearns to please its master, personnel took on the role of corporate Doberman, fiercely protecting the organization while snarling at managers, "You can't do that. . . the law won't let you." At long last, personnel had a voice. But to managers and supervisors, it sounded like an angry growl. No small wonder that, whenever possible, personnel types were avoided.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the language of organizations changed, and the watchdogs got a new image. Employees no longer were a means of production, they were assets. Enlightened



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companies changed the name of the personnel function to human resources. Pay for performance, quality of work life, individual and organization development, team building, corporate culture and quality circles were the new buzz words, born of the refocusing on "people needs" supported by volumes of quick-fix management books that became instant national best sellers. The refocus heralded a metamorphosis from the old adversarial line-staff relationship to a new partnership between human resources and line management. The partnership was to be forged from a mutual understanding that there was no room for disregard and fear on the bottom line.

Today, though branded a cost center and not a profit center, human resources' profile is more prominent. In many Fortune 500 companies, the vice president of human resources reports directly to the chief executive officer and sometimes sits on the senior management committee of the organization. Unencumbered by their old image as rule makers and naysayers, human resource professionals are often consulted by young managers seeking new ways to attract, develop and retain good employees. What has not changed is that the role of the HR professional still is ill-defined.

As true today as it was in the past, whatever the corporate winds stir up and whatever new management expressions

are coined soon will be in neon splendor on the briefing books of trainers, compensation experts, recruiters, affirmative action specialists, HRD administrators and HR executives as they move through the corridors of corporate America. Yes, there is some new technology, a new language and a new image, but the HR professional's role remains unclear.

Recently I was asked by the nation's twelfth largest bank to identify and define the human resource professional's role, a contract that allowed me to conduct research and establish a generic role definition.

Breaking ground

As is typical of large organization structures, the bank, in 1980, had a decentralized human resources function. A small corporate HR staff was responsible for developing the programs, policies and procedures implemented by line managers. Line managers were supported by HR professionals, who were part of the divisional staff, not part of corporate HR. Because the HR people reported to the division, and because the division controlled their salaries, these professionals were rewarded for doing what line management wanted. This reporting relationship was complicated by the fact that most of the HR professionals had been promoted from line jobs within the bank. They had no prior training or HR ex-

perience. As a result, corporate HR, line managers and employees felt ill-served by the division HR professionals.

After extensive interviews with all levels of division employees and members of corporate HR, a lack of consensus about the role of the HR professional was apparent. Analysis of the information collected in the interviews revealed three main aspects of the HR professional's role: technical expertise; consultant skill; and personal power. Figure 1 illustrates the model used to develop the role, each vector indicating a continuum of ability in each of the three identified components. For example, technical expertise, whether in a specialized role such as compensation or training or in a generalist role such as manager of human resources, ranges from "little" to "partial" to "solid" to "substantial." Consultant skill, which identifies how one uses his or her technical expertise, ranges from "tell" to "sell" to "participate" to "facilitate." The third vector of the model identifies the kind of power available to the HR professional. HR is a staff function with no real role power, except that of invoking legal statutes covering equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. Personal power, the amount of trust and integrity the HR professional exhibits in his or her conduct and job performance, was identified. Personal power ranges from "nonexistent" to "limited" to "extended" to "great." It is the most elusive

Figure 1—Components of the HR Professional's Role

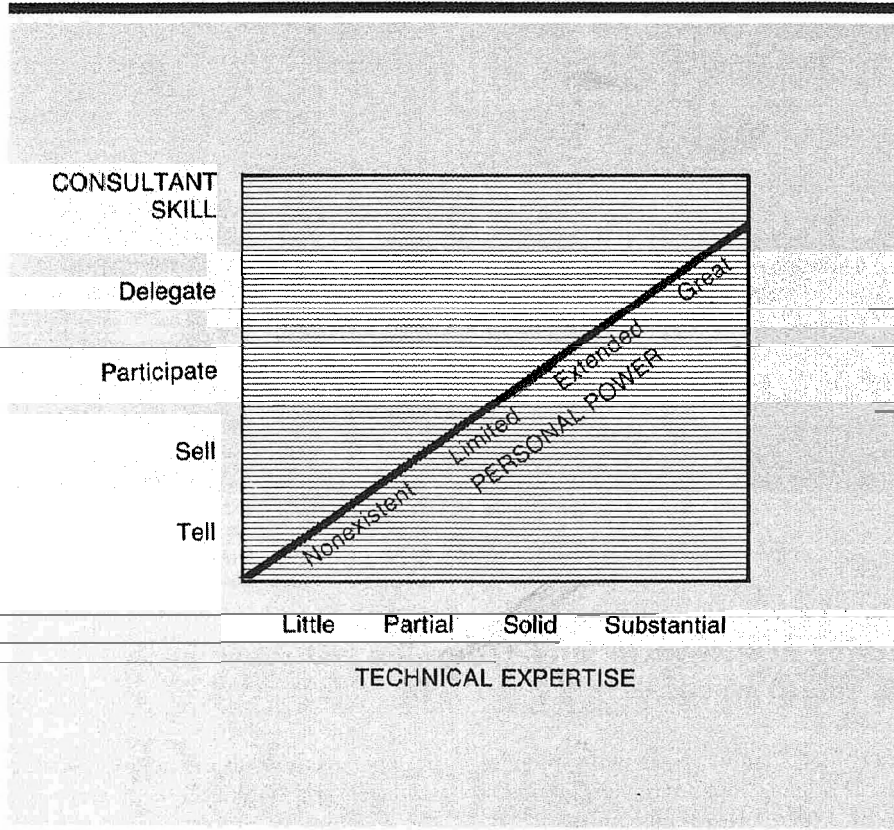


Exhibit 1—Seven Categories Addressed by the Questionnaire

Decision Making:	measures whether decisions are appropriate, whether information needed by decision makers is accessible and whether organization members affected by decisions are consulted before decisions are made.
Communications:	measures the extent to which the flow of information throughout the organization is facilitated upward, downward and laterally.
Support:	measures whether the HR professional values people as worthwhile assets or resources by the way he or she shows concern for employee welfare; lets employees know that they are worthwhile persons doing useful work; and tries to improve working conditions.
Technological Readiness:	measures HR professional's problem-solving skills and whether the HR professional is viewed as adequately maintaining and updating HR policies, practices and programs for employees to do their jobs effectively.
Work Facilitation:	measures whether HR professional's behavior stimulates enthusiasm among employees for doing a good job while removing roadblocks that prevent good performance.
Goal Integration:	measures whether the HR professional works toward assuring that the goals of the organization and the needs of individuals are compatible, and that both are being fulfilled.
Trust:	measures the degree of confidence in and reliance on the integrity, strength, ability and surety of the HR professional.

and difficult component of the HR professional's role to define.

Once the model was approved by corporate HR and divisional line management, we developed a training program to help the HR professionals identify and understand their role while developing skills necessary for successful job performance. To measure the effectiveness of this training, 420 employees and managers were randomly selected from a division of 1,100 individuals. They completed a questionnaire that measured the effectiveness of the HR professional prior to the training program. The questionnaire addressed the model's three role components across seven categories that included decision making, communications, technological readiness, support, work facilitation, goal integration and trust (see Exhibit 1).

Building

The training program involved six days of classroom instruction that included lectures, films, case studies, interactive exercises, and small- and large-group discussions. The program addressed first the participants' perceptions of their role and the model used to develop the course (see Figure 1). Participants' responses to simulated work situations were coded according to "tell," "sell," "participate" and "facilitate." To move from the "tell/sell" mode to the "participate/facilitate" mode, problem solving was introduced. Participants later applied a problem-solving process in the technical expertise segments of the program. The goal was to provide alternative perspectives and behaviors for handling routine work situations and events confronting the HR professional.

The issue of power and how it is used followed the section on consultant skill. This section drew distinctions between role power and personal power. The information covered the functional and dysfunctional uses of personal power, the underlying personal motivation present in the use of power, and the appropriate uses of power in dynamic and stable environments. Among the different types of power identified were expertise, information, political access, assessed stature, staff support, traditional and credibility. This section concluded with a discussion on power strategies, including how to present a non-threatening image, ways to diffuse opposition to bring out conflict, the appropriateness of aligning with a powerful other, how to develop liaisons and when to use trade-offs.

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Finally, the program addressed technical knowledge in all aspects of human resources: legal issues; recruitment and selection; affirmative action and equal opportunity; reward systems, performance systems, training and employee relations. Having built the foundation of consultant skill and uses of power, the technical portions were designed as learn-apply sessions. Technical material was presented, such as the law and its effect on the employment process, and participants applied what they learned in simulated situations. The complete program addressed both the acquisition of knowledge and the application of that knowledge.

A comparison of the pre- and post-questionnaire results showed that the HR professionals clarified their role for themselves and, through different performance of their role, clarified their job function for those they served. The model was a tool that helped the HR professional understand that a person with great technical expertise who used a "tell" mode was of limited effectiveness, as was a person with a "facilitate" style who had little technical expertise. The model helped participants focus on the balance required in all three vectors to achieve optimal effectiveness. Questionnaire results revealed that divisional employees at all levels, as well as corporate HR, judged the HR professional as more effective six months after the training than they had judged them prior to the training.

The dynamic HR role

The critical issue that emerges from these findings is the need to identify the role of the HR professional. Whether this or some other model is used, a complete definition of the HR professional's role is more than a measure of technical expertise. Effective application of that expertise is the key to successful performance as an HR professional. Personal style and individual power are as inherent in that success as is technical expertise. The HR professional is a consultant to the organization, providing programs and support mechanisms that assist the organization in achieving its business strategy.

Beyond role definition lies another question. What is the purpose of the HR role? The wisest response to that question was made many years ago by Carl Philipp, then director of personnel for the Automobile Club of Southern California. In addressing his staff, he said, "Your goal is to work your way out of your job by passing onto the 'line' the means for them to implement the personnel (human resources) function." That goal, in all reality, can never be achieved because organizations and the environments in which they operate are dynamic, not static. The smooth meshing of individual and organizational needs demands that HR professionals continually assess, analyze, modify and develop new programs, methods and policies that support line managers in implementing the human resource function.

Precisely because the goal is unachievable, HR professionals can, without threatening their own interests, perform in a manner that would work them out of their jobs. And what is that manner? That of a corporate leader: a person with a vision of how to optimize human assets, the articulateness to gain commitment to that vision and the ability to manage across functional lines so that others can make that vision a reality. It is a manner indicating that at least 30 percent of the HR professional's time is spent developing HR expertise and becoming educated about the organization's business and the system of which that business is a part. The manner is one that assists others in uncovering what they already know as they discover what else is available. In this manner of the HR professional is demonstrated the understanding that power is capacity and that containing power limits the capacity of the leader as well as those being led.

We have only to look at the history of our profession to understand why the appeal of credentialing and certification has increased in recent years. Such processes are really attempts to define the role of the HR professional. The definition will not be complete until technical expertise, implementation skills and personal attributes all are addressed. If they are not, HR pro-

fessionals still will be casting 20 years from now. The elephant burial ground is no longer a relevant metaphor for human resources. . . nor is corporate Doberman. But to join fully the ranks of corporate leaders, HR professionals must possess and demonstrate an explicit understanding of their role.

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