HR Beating Recession – 5 things to do

During recessions it is often HR and in particular, OD and Learning and Development, who find themselves 'cut' early in the redundancy process, that is unless they have particular skills or know how in redundancy procedures. Seen as a costly overhead divorced from the business, HR is an easy target. As an HR professional, how do you make yourself indispensible during times of redundancy ensuring you and your function, remain relevant?

Speak language of CEO and FD – talk strategy and cost

A major criticism of HR is that it is seen to be too soft and wishy washy and fails to understand hard business issues. Although this may not be true in every case it is a sad reality that the number of senior HR taking their rightful place on the Board of organizations has not grown significantly over the past 20 years. One step away from the Board puts you one level away on influence and impact.

Change people's perceptions of you by speaking the language of the CEO and Finance Director. Start talking in hard numbers – talk about costs – hidden costs, capital costs, and ROI, investment. Initiate and lead top team workshops to revisit the business goals in response to recession. If you're not on the Board, offer to facilitate the workshop or meeting to understand the issues and get closer to the decision makers.

Be proactive in cutting your own costs

Play the good corporate citizen and revisit your own budget before anyone else does. Identify areas of saving – for instance, suggest using internal facilitators such as senior managers to deliver training courses. This not only saves costs but it means the courses are usually more relevant and specific to the business. Encourage and facilitate online training and distribute free resources and material readily available. For instance, subscribe to McKinsey quarterly and provide weekly or monthly synopses on each article. Better still, send targetted articles to the relevant departments – for instance, an article on how to reshape a customer department to the Customer Services Director.

Measure ROI on each and every HR intervention using established models such as Kirkpatrick's Model (1959). Reject every intervention which does not reach level 4 – "impacting the performance of the organisation".

Focus on the longer term

During times of economic uncertainty it is typical for individuals and organisations to focus on the short term – getting cash in the door is critical. This short termism which develops means that it is easy to forget the deep skills and know how that has developed over the years and is critical to day to day delivery of the business. Understand the core competencies the business needs to deliver its strategy over the longer term and then undertake an audit of the skills out there in the business. Highlight those individuals who have those core competencies and ensure they are not the first ones to be made redundant. Ask how long it will take the business to replace an engineer with 15 years experience in a particular expertise area as opposed to a new graduate with 6 months experience? Take a strategic approach to redundancy by focusing on the longer term and speaking in business terms.

Get close(r) to your customers

HR is rightly criticized for developing and maintaining closer associations and networks with other HR folk than with their own customers. Getting close and personal with customers is critical in a recession. Customers don't stop buying during a recession, they just buy more cleverly. HR needs to understand what service/info/skills they are looking for, get these in writing and develop a business case for why HR still has a relevant role to play.

Encourage use of experienced interims or consultants who have worked in recessionary times

It's been nearly 18 years since our last recession. A generation of workers does not have the skill set or the experience to lead their organisation safely through a recession and out the other side. Identifying this and having an action plan to counteract this will mean you are seen as proactive, strategic and indispensible and definitely too valuable to lose as we move into recessionary times.

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