

HR competencies evolving, pros need "tough empathy"

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Many professionals get into HR because "they like people" but they need to develop competencies such as "tough empathy" to do the job well, says HR consultant Scott Comte.

Successful HR practitioners require seven distinct competencies, he told a recent breakfast briefing.

Crossroads Human Resources, of which Comte is director, developed the competency model using AHR1's ["model of excellence"](#) as a starting point.

The competency model aims to define the people needed in effective HR teams, and is "a work in progress", he told HR Daily.

"This is an area of interest for a lot of organisations because HR has moved from purely compliance driven ("how can we make sure we comply with all the appropriate policies?") to, in some organisations, actual profit centres, where they have to generate value - demonstrable value - and as a consequence, what's being asked of HR professionals is changing."

Comte says HR professionals need to have:

- **Tough empathy** - they should be tough on problems but easy on people. It is the ability to efficiently solve problems while remaining sensitive to others' feelings, perspectives and concerns".

"A key attribute of this competency is the ability to consider the feelings and emotions relevant to the problem at hand, without losing sight of the objectives that need to be delivered."

Feedback from HR directors suggests this competency is relatively rare among HR practitioners, and must be developed.

"A lot of people get into HR thinking it's going to be nice and warm and fuzzy," Comte says. "They get a rude shock when they have to start using things like 'tough empathy'. But you don't want to lose these people - you want to develop them. And the only way you can develop tough empathy is to have someone there coaching and mentoring them and saying, 'Unfortunately this is your job... don't demonise the person, but make sure you meet the objective for the organisation.'"

- **Resilience** - this is "the ability to maintain delivery standards under pressure, persevere with activities despite obstacles and setbacks, and uphold a positive outlook throughout difficult circumstances".

Many directors feel that "either you've got it or you haven't", Comte says, but resilience can be developed. Strategic innovation - "the ability to generate new ideas, create growth strategies and lead change that generates significant new value for the organisation and internal customers". To be effective, this type of thinking needs to be goal orientated and aligned with the business objectives of the organisation, Comte says.

- **Proactive communication** - "the ability to confidently influence, actively listen and network with all types of people. Proactive communication incorporates the ability to effectively plan communications, deliver messages flawlessly and adapt the approach used depending on the audience".

- **Action orientation** - "the ability to 'make it happen' and be outcome focussed. This competency involves setting challenging goals and taking prompt action to ensure that the desired result is achieved in the most efficient way possible".

HR directors report that finding people with action orientation is a big challenge, Comte says, but this competency is developed through experience.

"As they progress through their careers, someone who's made HR manager or senior HR manager should have action orientation, or they wouldn't have gotten that far.

"When less experienced, you doubt your decisions and think about them too much. I've heard a manager say, 'A bad decision is better than no decision'. If you keep making bad decisions then obviously that's a problem, however you need to make a decision. You need to get things moving. You need to deliver on what's required."

- **Technical mastery** - HR professionals must possess a large amount of both practical and theoretical knowledge, in both the generalist and specialist human resources fields, Comte says. "Technical mastery refers to the depth and breadth of an individual's knowledge and experience in the specific tasks, processes, skills, strategies, laws and regulations of the HR profession."

This competency distinguishes HR from other professions, he adds. "While you can take people from other professions and bring them into HR, they still need to have the technical mastery and they need to have it based upon solid theory, not just practice."

- **Business acumen** - this is "the ability to view the business from a holistic perspective, understand the financial and operational underpinnings of the business and what it takes to make it profitable and meet its commercial objectives".

"This would include knowledge of the business's finances, its business lifecycle and the external market in which it operates."

This competency becomes more important as an HR professional's career progresses, Comte notes. "A lot of people criticise HR for not understanding the reality of the commercial environment. At junior level it's not so important because it's more functional work that you do, but as you climb the ladder, it [becomes] a key competency."

The competencies, apart from technical mastery, cannot be taught in a classroom environment, Comte points out.

"They have to [come from] experiential, on-the-job learning, be it through coaching, mentoring, or different sorts of exposures in an actual environment."

The competencies have equal value, he says, but are "quite interdependent, and at certain levels each becomes more important".

Proactive communication, for example, helps to develop HR's credibility within an organisation, "but if it isn't combined with business acumen, then no-one takes them seriously".

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