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HR and sustainability: partner or pioneer?

Human Resources professionals should hook into overall business sustainability strategy and add value

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Sustainable business practices precede sustainable business culture. As most of us are not robots or Pavlov dogs, we do not 'go sustainable' the moment the CEO declares this to be the new strategy. Embedding a sustainable culture, to use the jargon of the day, links underlying values and strategic imperatives to the actions required of all employees in a sustainable business.

In most companies of a certain size, a human resources manager is employed to help translate business strategy into the daily actions of people. In bigger companies, this runs to HR departments with large teams. The HR function's most critical and unique contribution in any organisation is developing and guiding processes for transformational change. Today, HR professionals see themselves as business partners and contributors to growth and profit, because managing change effectively is one of the most important enablers of successful business. HR needs a deep understanding of the core business to bring the right solutions to the table and be equally accountable for results.

So it is with sustainability. A company working towards sustainability does things differently, with implications for the technologies it develops, the core products it sells, how they are marketed, the stakeholders it involves in different parts of the process, the way it works with suppliers, its involvement with local communities and the measures it takes to protect the environment. Engagement of employees is a core element in the success of a sustainability agenda, and the embedding of an open, values-based culture is a necessary precursor.

HR's role in supporting sustainability is therefore twofold. First, it must ensure that a sustainable approach to managing employees is part of business strategy. Employee well being, health and safety, work-life balance, diversity and inclusion, gender equality, hiring and firing practices, fair rewards, a living wage, employee learning and growth, positive internal communications, open dialogue and employee involvement in the

community are all themes that come up in this space. Sustainability begins at home, and HR's first role is to ensure that a company manages its employees in a sustainable way. We might call this accepting responsibility for the business impacts ON employees.

However, this only goes so far. A truly sustainable business is created when all employees are aware of how their roles contribute to the sustainability agenda. Employees have many touch points with internal and external stakeholders on a daily basis, and the ultimate sign of an embedded sustainability culture is when each and every one of them embraces the principles of sustainability and applies them in every action and interaction. In this way, HR transforms the business impacts ON employees into the sustainable impacts OF employees.

This is the essence of my recently published book. It is a wake-up call and a toolkit for HR professionals in supporting the transformation to a sustainable business culture. A wake-up call because most HR professionals do not yet fully understand corporate social responsibility or sustainability, let alone embrace it. A toolkit because the book teaches HR managers how to do this step by step, in each of the functional areas. This should empower HR managers to hook in to the overall business sustainability strategy and add value.

In the absence of such strategy, HR managers should advance responsible practices from within their own functional brief. This delivers better results and aligns with their accountability for the impacts of the business on the community and environment. Modifying HR practices to adapt to the principles of sustainability does not mean re-engineering the entire HR function, but it does mean approaching every HR decision from a broader stakeholder perspective. If HR managers accept this responsibility, HR will be both a partner and a pioneer and a sustainable business reality might just be within reach.

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