

Insight

The Great End Game Con

Paul Davies

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The reason why HR programmes often fail and what to do about it – P. Davies

End Games

HR is never short of game changing ideas. Every generation seems to develop its own theory for solving HR's challenges. Yet, the ideas come and go and the challenges remain.

Any wonder, then, that Line Managers with 20 – 30 years' service become discouraged with the experience of implementing one disappointing HR programme after another until sometimes the cycle goes full circle and they find themselves implementing the same idea that failed to work 25 years previously.

There are countless reasons why many HR transformation strategies aren't sustainable, but the one reason that no one seems willing to admit is that no single, End-Game solution exists to begin with.

The idea of an HR theory or a programme that can cure a company's ills is as seductive as a magic pill for curing hunger and just as illusive. The art, science, skill – whatever – of managing large numbers of people effectively in a single enterprise is hard, complicated, never-ending work.

To suggest otherwise is to participate in the Great End-Game con.

Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus

The ancient Roman author Vegetius describes the organisation and methods of the early Roman military, including training, discipline and motivation. He writes in an instructional way to give weight to his plea for reform of the late Imperial army.

It is fair to assume that the Egyptians of pyramid fame, the builders of Europe's medieval cathedrals, Seventeenth Century Dutch shipyards, the British East India Company and the railroad companies of the American West must have also grappled with fairly sizeable organisation and people management problems.

This is not to claim that these relics of a time before email and employment rights are analogous to contemporary multi-nationals. However, it is to argue that the core problems and solutions have been known to us for a very, very long time.

Does anyone truly believe that in the history of human endeavour no one ever set a workman measurable targets or objectives before Management by Objectives came along?

Has no one in the whole gambit of Chinese, Japanese, Western and Indian civilisation never thought that they may get more out of engaged people than disengaged ones, or that the value that their talented people create might be the big difference between them and others?

Of course not.

So, why, decade after decade is there a brand new thing in HR that we all implement in the hope that it will change the game?

Wishful Thinking

The Great End-Game Con succeeds because we are addicted to neatly packaged answers.

The Board or the Analysts aren't interested in a nuanced, albeit authentic, analysis, or a hard, complicated, never ending, root and branch overhaul of company institutions. They need an answer they can wrap up in pretty PowerPoints and publish to the world.

Preferably it should have a catchy new name, and ideally have been researched by a respected academic. For added gravitas the solution should be recommended by a well-known consultancy company in return for a decision-reinforcing fee.

Once bundled together, another End-Game Con is packaged as the answer that will make the difference. It has a name; it has a book; it has an implementation plan, a business case, and a target date. It is exactly what everyone needs. It may even work. But, more likely, it will keep everyone happy for a year or two then fade away.

Best of all, there is no blame if it doesn't work out. After all, everyone thought it was the right answer – the best-selling author, the highly-paid consultants, lots of other HR Directors – a whole generation thought it would change the game.

The Hard Answer

There is only one way to successfully manage large numbers of people in the common interests of a single enterprise – the hard way.

The body of knowledge on the subject, from Vegetius to Dave Ulrich, sheds light and offers insights. Everyone benefits from the perspective and experience of others. But, there is no End-Game solution and the game will never end.

No Hidden Secret

Succeeding through the organisation and motivation of people has always been, and until machines take over most likely always will be, concerned with assuring core HR capability in:

- Recruitment,
- Training,
- Talent management,
- Employment relationships,
- Motivation and
- Pay.

No surprises, then.

Whether one says Learning instead of Training, or Employee Relations instead of Industrial Relations or Business Partner instead of HR Generalist is to pay homage to one particular insight or another; it doesn't change the game.

The hard fact is that there is no single people management secret. The effectiveness of organisations depends upon being exceptionally capable in all of the familiar core HR disciplines.

No Short Cut

Another hard fact is that there are no short cuts. Consistently executing the basics perfectly under pressure is, as any elite sportsperson knows, the most difficult task of all. There can be no leap to a desired, high-performing future state, and a new cultural

programme can't be superimposed over the old. New beliefs or paradigms take years, perhaps a decade, to take hold. Critically, elite capability is not achieved without the hard groundwork being done first.

No Change and Communications Plan, or Programme Charter or level of senior management conviction will ever alter this.

Groundwork

HR Capability shouldn't just be a conversation about "Employee Engagement" and "High Performing Teams" or "Leadership Excellence". The unfashionable reality is that these are all outcomes not strategies.

Old-Fashioned Admin

Good, old-fashioned HR process efficiency and effectiveness have to be assured first, so that the basic tools of the function can earn the respect of Line leaders.

Success here allows HR to turn its attention to Organisation Capability.

Round Pegs Round Roles

It's largely forgotten these days when behavioural Competencies and leadership Values are the rage, but professional competence (knowledge and skills), marshalled efficiently and effectively, is the bedrock of Organisation effectiveness.

In practical terms it's a managed training catalogue, planned training, certification, effective people recruitment and deployment.

When HR puts the right people in the right jobs and trains them well, it has half of the problem solved without even coming close to a modern management fad.

People Management

Before striving for behaviours associated with the best leadership in the business world, attention should be paid to getting the fundamentals right at an early stage.

In reality, managers need tools like anybody else. They need processes and structure and training. A toolbox, if you like, of successful manager interventions.

These actions might include basic things such as team orientation, staff communications and staff involvement, the building blocks of what later may develop into engagement.

Performance Management

Out of professional managerial competence will flow performance expectations and accountability.

Performance Management doesn't have to be complex or magnificently precise; neither is it a solution in itself; people just need to know what is expected and that they will be held to account. They also like to know that others will be held to account too.

The Icing on the Cake

If HR administration is efficient and invisible, if core services are effective, if the organisation and manager competence is assured and performance management successfully ingrained, it's probably time to start thinking about whether leadership excellence, high-performing teams and an engagement culture are emerging.

Inspirational Leaders

Professionally competent managers set high standards for leadership. They desire to be leaders of people and they need to report to leaders of people.

Talent Development

Similarly, an organisation packed with competent performing individuals is required to meet talent development, career planning and succession needs. They also require leadership development training linked to high performing behaviours and organisation culture.

High-Performing Teams

Where competence is the norm, exceptional performance becomes the goal.

Delivering on promises, over achieving targets and hitting deadlines every time becomes a matter of personal pride, not organisation diktat. Staff work for each, and letting a colleague down is unthinkable.

Engagement Culture

Such an environment needs integrity, frankness, trust, ownership, all of which lend themselves to an engagement culture and behaviour norms.

Conclusion

This isn't new thinking. Managing organisations effectively has been around since before the Roman Legions codified it.

The call is to get back to reality and simplicity and recognise that there is no miracle cure. This isn't easy, and it takes a great deal of time to do properly.

But the quicker it is recognised the sooner HR can focus on the hard-core building blocks that deliver success.