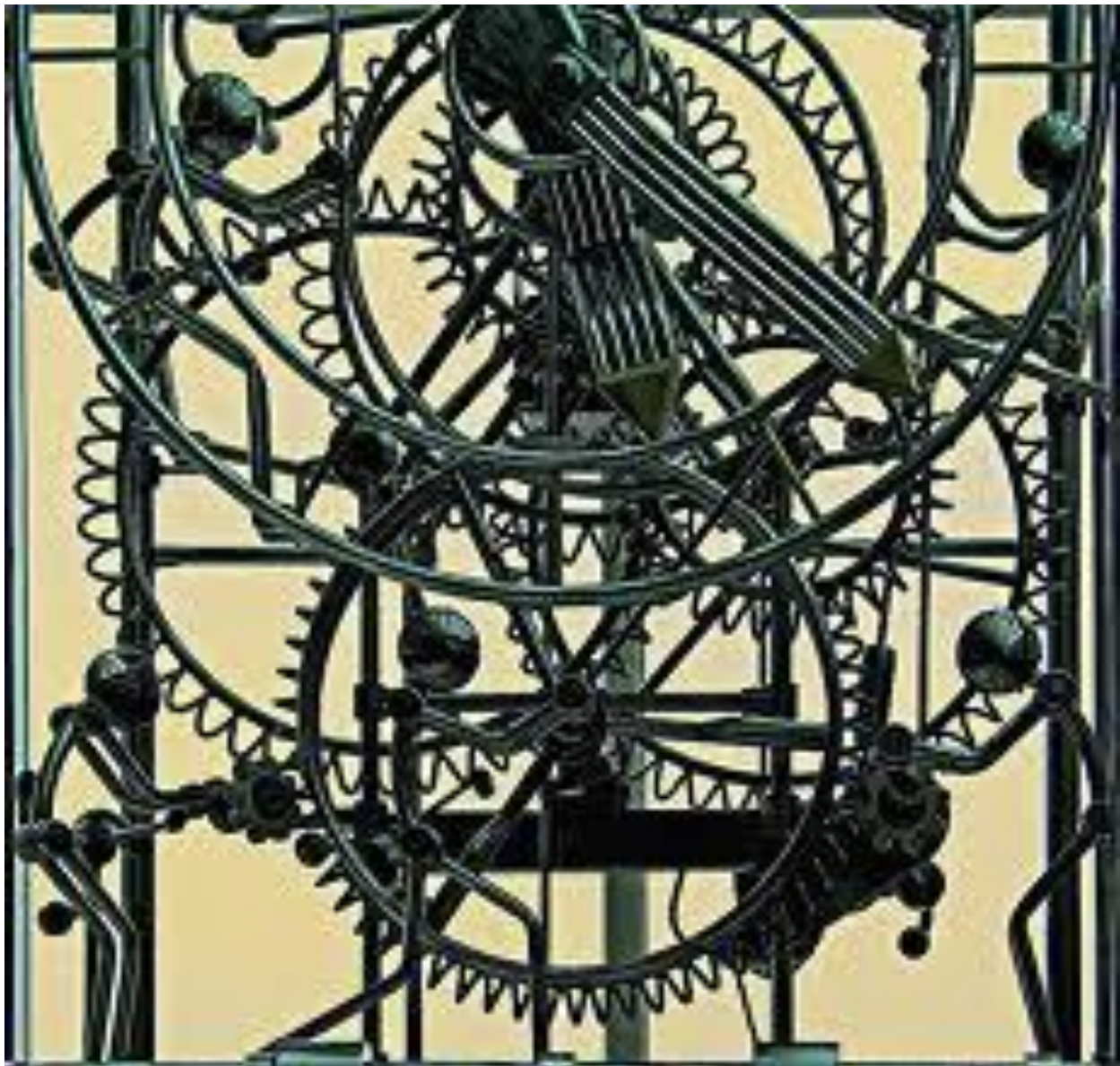


Building Your HR Leadership Career

By: Suzanne Miklos, Ph.D.



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The modern workplace is constantly changing, and this is especially true for HR leaders. A shrinking yet increasingly diverse labor pool, an aging workforce, complex and changing business models and globalization are all issues that organizations must adapt to in order to succeed. HR plays a key role in resolving these dilemmas. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) identified key priorities in 2015 for the HR profession. The top three priorities included managing talent, improving leadership development and managing demographics. Talent management activities are longer term and it is easy to lag behind business needs simply based on the required time to build and manage talent pipelines. Managing complexities is essential to moving up the career ladder in an HR role. HR professionals have to understand a broader array of regulatory requirements, talent management dynamics and business strategies than ever before against a backdrop of a highly stratified workforce. This white paper examines three lenses for considering your HR career.

The first lens is levels of leadership, each of which requires one addition of new skills. To advance through management ranks is to examine typical hurdles in professional development. There are key shifts in thinking, values and competencies that predictably occur regardless of function. A commonly used model, the Career Crossroads Model (Mahler & Drotter, 1986), describes career moves in terms of managing increasingly broader levels of an organization. The first crossroad is making

the leap from managing one's self to managing people, eventually moving all the way up to managing the enterprise. For HR, the top role is at a functional level, managing all of HR across an enterprise. This requires broad exposure and expertise.

At the early management levels, there is a heavy emphasis on people and process management. Supervising others requires learning to delegate, to provide feedback and to develop a team. By the time a leader is managing other managers, there is often a need to manage technical areas without being the top expert in the group. Understanding assumptions and implications, being able to manage through metrics, and being able to critically analyze and guide process improvements and problem resolution become key skills. This is a highly uncomfortable transition for many because it takes delegation skills up to the next level. There is often a significant identity loss with not being the expert and with letting technical skills take a back seat. It becomes essential to develop a reputation for strong contributions. HR leaders at this level must effectively present and sell their ideas internally. External partnerships and vendor relationships must also be cultivated.

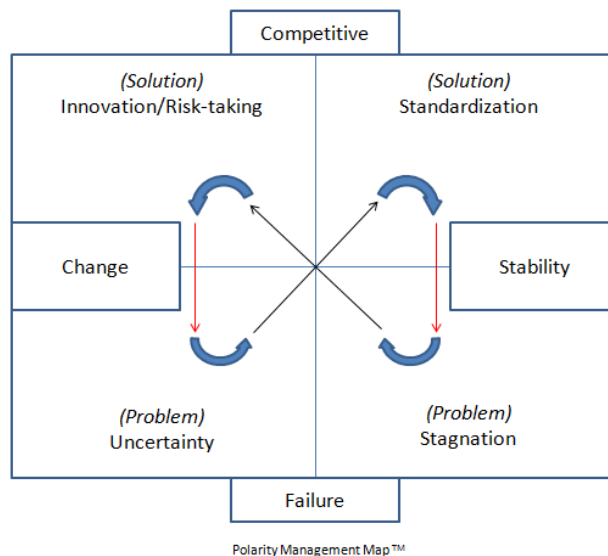
A major shift in responsibility and focus is needed at each career transition. After gaining the management and technical skills needed, HR professionals must be able to maintain and develop relationships outside of HR and align themselves with the operational leaders. HR professionals who engage in ongoing professional development will be better equipped to hone their industry knowledge and to develop strong business relationships and networks. We recommend that HR managers join not-for-profit boards in order to grow their command and decision-making skills in organizational settings where their expert knowledge is minimal.

The second lens reflects one's need to put on different thinking hats. A key growth area for HR leaders is to evolve to be more strategic and integrative in their thinking. Leadership is a constant learning experience which can be uncomfortable for those who are not both confident and open to new thinking. This level of complexity involves critical dilemmas that cannot be solved by traditional problem solving and do not have clear-cut solutions. Trying to find one right answer for a strategic case study leads to a poor outcome. Engaging multiple viewpoints to examine and frame the issues displays executive thinking. One useful approach to strategic challenges is to examine them as polarities to be managed rather than problems to be solved, which often proves to be a more effective perspective to take.

HR Milestone Development Experiences	
<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Implement an HRIS system▪ M&A- Integration▪ Labor Relations/Negotiation▪ Start Up or Turn Around▪ International/Cross Cultural Work▪ Succession of a Key Leader	<ul style="list-style-type: none">▪ Supporting the Board▪ Operational P&L Responsibility▪ Cross Functional Experience Within HR▪ A Legal or Ethics Challenge▪ Implement a Centralized Program

A traditional problem can be defined as an issue or challenge that has one right answer or two or more right answers that are independent (Johnson, 1998). Polarities are different from problems in that they do not have a single solution. They represent tensions to balance. Polarities are chronic issues that are unavoidable and unsolvable. A common example of a polarity to balance in organizational settings is centralization and decentralization. Each choice has advantages and disadvantages. That is why most organizations continue to tweak their organizational structure as the business matures and changes.

Some common balancing acts for HR include balancing employee and company interests, advocating for employees and advocating for management’s perspective, balancing efforts toward employee and organizational development, as well as considering employee and customer satisfaction. In an individual contributor role, one may be primarily responsible for one end of a polarity such as taking an employee’s perspective, improving quality or increasing efficiency. At a managerial level, one may be responsible for assisting other team leaders in balancing their polarities and effectively communicating what balancing actually entails. At more senior levels, these poles need to be explicitly balanced. For example, balancing stability and change can be critical for HR leaders supporting a business shift. It is important to evolve the culture, build new skills into the workforce and change metrics in order to drive new behaviors. However, customer continuity, employee engagement and productivity are all supported by stability. Each pole has a benefit (positive) and problem (negative) aspect. Both poles are working toward one common goal: being a successful company (see map below).



When polarities are well managed, the organization succeeds because, in this example, it benefits from sufficient stability while maximizing the value of change (Johnson, 1998). Inside functional roles, a manager may be responsible for one side of a polarity and therefore less able to view the broader implications of the polarity. By most accounts, up to 80% of organizational change initiatives fail to deliver the expected result supporting the challenge of this dynamic balance. Viewing complex challenges as a polarity to manage rather than a problem to solve can prove to be a more effective strategy for achieving goals at hand.

Balancing personal traits and skills is a third useful lens for growing HR leadership talent. This framework allows a focus on leveraging strengths while maturing professionally. The framework is paradox; a paradox is similar to polarity management in that it is a dynamic rather than static view. Harrison Assessments uses the concept of Paradox Theory in its assessments, which involves an understanding that traits that might appear to be at opposite ends of a spectrum are not opposites but in fact complement each other (Harrison, 2015). For example, accepting oneself the way one is and wanting to improve could seem to be in conflict to some people. However, professionals who are both high in self-acceptance and desirous of improvement have the ability to pursue continuous improvement with confidence and ease, a strong position from which to role model leadership development.

Another paradox that is critical to balance in HR roles is the analytical and the intuitive skill sets. Being able to rely on insights from broad business exposure, and understanding cultural and political issues well enough to predict probable barriers or opportunities, are both skills that tap into intuition. Some HR professionals rely heavily

on these skills and do not balance them with the strong analytics required to understand business financial analyses and drive HR analytics to the next level. Other HR managers have grown up in a technical side of HR and are comfortable in data and analytics but unable to mesh that perspective with knowing how to integrate that data effectively within the fabric of an executive team discussion. Balance is the key because both perspectives are right; utilizing paradox theories allows HR professionals to better eliminate blind spots and enables them to take on a wider array of challenges.

Moving up to a higher level of leadership within HR involves taking on complex challenges, managing for coherence across the HR functions and balancing out one's own traits in order to become a more strategic and influential leader. Managing people and processes at higher levels involves moving past traditional problem solving methods and past HR technical skills. (Kesler & Kirincic, 2004; Johnson, 1998).

Using assessments, leveraging mentors and finding opportunities to deliver not a right answer but a more powerful dialogue to your organization are crucial ways that mid-level HR professionals can continue to grow their perspective and their flexibility in delivering their strengths with balance and influence.

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