

Role of Human Resources as Change Agent in Enabling Equal Opportunity Practices

K. Raghavi and N. Gopinathan

Abstract—Human Capital is the greatest asset of any organization and the organization makes an obvious effort in getting people with different background, skills and abilities to work toward the goal or purpose of the organization. Diversity of experiences, cultures, opinions, physical attributes and group identities are highly valued and appreciated as it provides a richness without which the organization could neither be faithful to its values nor successfully achieve its goals. It has long been argued that equality of opportunity for these diverse set of employees brings occupational benefits and that it is in the employers' interest to implement policy to promote equality of opportunity. Factually, the Human Resources (HR) has drawn all its existential powers by placing itself at the center of administrative activities within the business organization they supported by building a fine bridge between the organization and its employee community. Subsequently, elevating the HR's role is for it to become the change agent to build an Equal Opportunity culture in the organization. This article proposes a framework intended to depict that Equal Opportunity Practices yield strategic value to the organization and that the HR plays a dynamic role in implementing it.

Index Terms—Equal opportunity practices, non-discrimination, change agent, HR policies, strategic value, organizational culture.

I. INTRODUCTION

Equal Opportunity refers to the equality of access to jobs, promotions, and other opportunities in corporations, associations and non-profit organizations [1]. Historically, the true beginning of the idea of Equal Opportunity can be traced to the Fourteenth Amendment in 1868. In 1933, Congress passed the Unemployment Relief Act, which forbade discrimination in employment on the basis of race, color, or creed. In early 1961 President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10925, establishing the President's Committee on Equal Opportunity.

The next stage was the passage of the Title VII Civil Rights Act of 1964, signed by President Lyndon Johnson, who sought to continue Kennedy's policies with his own set of programs called the Great Society that aimed at eliminating employment discrimination based on the usual litany of race, religion, sex, or national origin. Further, this has been amended on numerous occasions in the past 30 years, including the enactment of the Equal Employment Opportunity Act of 1972, the Pregnancy Discrimination Act of 1978, the Civil Rights Reformation Act of 1987, the Civil Rights Act of 1991, and the Family and Medical Leave Act of

1993.

The Human Resource profession has evolved during the past 20 years and continues to change, from the collective demographics of HR professionals and the ways that practitioners enter the profession to the functions and roles served by HR and the value it brings to organizations. Once referred to as 'personnel', the role and functions of HR has rapidly expanded and included such responsibilities that had not been considered essential in simpler times like the Equal Opportunity Programs. The Strategic role of HR, which is all about understanding change and how to deal with it, paves way for enhancing the notion of Equal Opportunity in employment and the outcome is that equality practices are now fully entrenched [2].

II. EQUAL EMPLOYMENT OPPORTUNITY – AN OVERVIEW

Equal Opportunity is the principle of non-discrimination which emphasizes that opportunities in education, employment, advancement, benefits and resource distribution, and other areas should be freely available to all citizens irrespective of their age, race, gender, gender-reassignment, religion, political association, color, ethnic origin, civil partnership status, disability, nationality, pregnancy and maternity, parental responsibilities or any other individual or group characteristic unrelated to ability, performance, and qualification. It is a stipulation that all people should be treated similarly, unhampered by artificial barriers or prejudices or preferences, except when particular 'distinctions can be explicitly justified' [3].

The organization's HR professionals are committed to the active implementation of the equality policy and promoting a culture that supports the policy by overseeing the integration of the equality policy into all aspects of the HR policies and organizational practices. To induce this true transformation, the structure and every system and process must reinforce the desired culture of Equal Opportunity. HR can initiate to define what the current cultural status is and how it adds or detracts from the organization's objectives [4]. And all leaders must embrace new attitudes and conduct their activities in new and different ways. Not just the HR, but changing the culture requires the efforts of everyone in the organization.

III. THE DRIVE FOR EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PRACTICES

The purpose of the Equal Opportunity practices is to enhance a workplace that provides equality of opportunities for all current, future and potential staff and where their

Manuscript received January 3, 2013; revised March 14, 2013.

K. Raghavi is with the Sathyabama University, Chennai (e-mail: raghavi.k@gmail.com).

dignity is protected and respected at all times. This will require the development of practices and procedures that cover the following aspects of employment [5]:

A. Recruitment

In both professional and non-professional areas, recruitment will include an attempt to locate a diverse applicant pool with the necessary qualifications and potential, and communicate to them the available employment opportunities. To ensure that non-discriminatory personnel recruitment occurs, the following policies are enforced:

- 1) All references to position vacancies will state that the organization is 'An Equal Opportunity Employer'
- 2) The HR Function serves as the official job information center to inform applicants of employment opportunities
- 3) All recruitment literature of the organization includes diverse group of people
- 4) All pre-employment testing to be reviewed by the HR

B. Selection

In order to accomplish the objectives of the Equal Opportunity plan, it is recognized that after the establishment of a qualified and diverse applicant pool, the process of selection from that pool must ensure all applicants equal opportunity for employment by adhering to the following aspects:

- 1) Hiring shall be accomplished without regard to race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic unless otherwise needed and place the most suitable people into all levels of its workforce and make every reasonable attempt to ensure that people are provided an equal opportunity to compete for positions
- 2) Employment forms and applications shall not include references to race, religion, creed, color, sex, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic
- 3) Applicants will be required to grant a release of criminal records for those positions which require a background investigation due to the nature of the position
- 4) In order to limit the potential occurrence of discrimination in job interviews, the focus of employment interviews should be legally permitted job-related questions

C. Training and Development

The HR Function shall inform all employees of training opportunities that will increase job effectiveness through the training which will:

- 1) Offer equal opportunity training to all employees
- 2) Provide an orientation program for all new employees which will include equal opportunity information
- 3) Encourage all employees who exhibit potential management or supervisory abilities to take appropriate training to qualify them for promotional opportunities

D. Compensation and Benefits Administration

Compensation should be paid without regard to race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic. In

accordance with this policy, the following are to be implemented:

- 1) Criteria for determining salary ranges for each classification shall be objective and based on job content
- 2) In all cases, the pay grade and salary at the time of hire will be determined on the basis of the jobs requirements and assigned duties
- 3) Benefits shall be offered to all eligible employees without regard to race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic
- 4) Tuition assistance will be awarded objectively and fairly to all eligible employees

E. Performance Management System

All employee performance evaluations shall be based on consistent job-related criteria to include equal opportunity related factors. In the event that an employee disagrees with an evaluation, he/she shall have the right to utilize the administrative review process.

F. Career Development Policies

Organizations recognize the importance of equal opportunity and therefore, adopt the following as policy:

- 1) When promoting employees, the HR shall place the most qualified people into all levels of its workforce and make every reasonable attempt to ensure that people are provided an equal opportunity to compete for promotions [6]
- 2) All notices concerning promotion opportunities will be posted in accordance with established guidelines for the posting of job openings
- 3) All employees who desire promotional opportunities should make their desires known to their supervisors
- 4) All employees will be equally afforded training opportunities to qualify them for promotions

G. Employment Conditions

All payments of wages, work assignments, work schedules, promotions, granting of leave of absences, enforcement of discipline, and other actions affecting the conditions of employment shall be made without regard to race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic.

H. Employee Benefits

Unless otherwise permitted or required by law, benefits shall apply equally to all employees regardless of race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic.

I. Disciplinary Action Procedures

Any employee found to be harassing or unfairly treating any person because of his/her race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic will be subject to severe disciplinary action up to and including termination. Any employee who feels that he/she has been discriminated against because of his/her race, religion, creed, color, gender, national origin, age, political affiliation, disability or any such characteristic

shall have the right to seek a remedy through the organization's grievance procedure or the discrimination complaint procedure [7].

IV. HR AS CHANGE AGENT

Organizations of all kinds face unrelenting changes in their environment [8]; the need for individuals who are capable of turning strategy into reality has created a new legitimacy for the change agent role – which is often located within the HR function. There are several reasons for this trend:

- 1) HR professionals have made significant strides over the past decade in becoming business partners; demonstrating the value they can add to the business
- 2) Executives are looking for where the change process can best be managed
- 3) Most business strategies require major changes in people-related issues; HR professionals develop and manage the key “people” systems needed to support organizational change [9]

Creating a renewed organization is the deliverable expected from the “change agent” role in Human Resources and four distinct roles are identified that Human Resources staff must assume - Strategic Player, Administrative Expert, Employee Champion, and Change Agent that provides hands-on tools in showing the HR professionals how they can operate in all four areas simultaneously and also offer specific recommendations for partnering with line managers to deliver value and make their organizations more competitive.



Source: Dave & Brockbank, 2005

Fig. 1. Dave Ulrich model of HR champions.

Further, his research presented that successful change agents had the ability to:

- 1) **Diagnose problems**-Understanding both the business drivers and the organization well enough to identify performance issues and analyze their impact on short and long term business results
- 2) **Build relationships**-Forming partnerships with mutual responsibility for the outcomes of the change effort. Because the risk is higher than with most other HR roles the level of trust required is much higher. Often the client and the change agent over emphasize one or the other (competency or relationship) especially when the risk increases while the challenge is to balance both to achieve the necessary level of trust.
- 3) **Ensure that the vision is articulated**-Interpreting the hopes and motivations of the workforce through the vision statement.
- 4) **Set a leadership agenda**-Defining the ongoing role for

leaders, such as communications, role modeling, reinforcement of desired behaviors etc. This requires the HR executive to understand intimately the dynamics, history and competencies of the leadership team and to have the tenacity to insist on the agenda's accomplishment.

- 5) **Solve problems**-Recommending solutions; a common expectation of HR professionals is not the same as solving problems. When it comes to the change agent role, the problems encountered are often loaded with emotional and political dynamics [10]. The change agent must possess the insight to recognize the problem, the sensitivity to see its importance to those involved, the courage to take honest and often difficult measures to resolve it and the credibility to be heard.
- 6) **Implement plans to achieve change goals**-Successful organizational change on any significant scale can be attributed to the right strategy and appropriate change in organization culture. Culture change, in turn, relies heavily on aligned and supportive people policies, systems and processes. In short, the implementation plan is an HR plan for both the HR function and the management [11].

Complementing these competencies are few other essentials for effectiveness as HR change agents:

- 1) Communication ability
- 2) Knowledge of the business; products/services and core work processes
- 3) Keeping a business perspective – both macro (mission/vision) and micro (what line managers cope with)
- 4) Planning and Project management skills
- 5) Ability to tolerate ambiguity
- 6) Managing resistance
- 7) Risk taking
- 8) Managing conflict

V. EQUAL OPPORTUNITY PRACTICES – HR'S INSTIGATION

An organization's HR specialist is often focused on getting the basics in place and finding a way to compete for talent, create a good working environment, help the workforce develop new skills, formalize rewards systems, and comply with applicable regulations. These key activities allow HR to lead and drive cultural development. Somewhere along the evolutionary path, the best companies recognize the importance of sustaining an Equal Opportunity culture as a competitive advantage. HR play an important role in creating an overall employee experience in alignment and every employee becomes a 'keeper of the culture' and the primary responsibility for implementing equality of opportunity in the workplace rests with each and every employee of the organization. Hence the role of the HR in implementing Equal Opportunity is to:

- 1) Interpret the legislative framework
- 2) Develop and promulgate appropriate policies to promote equality of opportunity
- 3) Monitor implementation
- 4) Develop effectiveness

VI. CRAFTING THE CHANGE - HR'S VALUE ADDITION

'Reference [12] shows HR Professionals add value when their work helps someone reach their goals. It is not the design of a program or declaration of policy that matters most, but what recipients gain from these actions. In a world of increasingly scarce resources, activities that fail to add value are not worth pursuing...The HR value proposition means that HR practices, departments, and professionals produce positive outcomes for key stakeholders – employees, line managers, customers, and investors'. The crux of the work is the outlining of a practical approach for HR Professionals to add business value.

In order to successfully execute the Equal Opportunity Practice, following steps are most significant for the HR:

- 1) Promoting Equal Opportunity in all aspects of the organization's activities and as an integral part of all policies and practices
- 2) Adopting policies, procedures, and practices for employees consistent with Equal Opportunity principles in the areas of recruitment, selection, promotion, training and development, performance management system and other conditions of employment
- 3) Providing a learning and working environment that is free of discrimination
- 4) Taking action to prevent the occurrence of unlawful discrimination by conducting educative programs and other activities and through the implementation of discrimination grievance procedures for the employees [13]
- 5) Taking positive steps to promote representative participation of diverse groups of workforce to achieve Equal Opportunity in employment
- 6) Continuing to develop specific policies that focus on equal opportunity issues (as the need arises) and monitor and evaluate such policies.

Ultimately, the effort of the HR in being a change agent for enabling Equal Opportunity Practices yields value additions by:

- 1) Ensuring that the workforce really does represent the serving community
- 2) Being able to attract and keep the very best human resource
- 3) Giving the organization an edge over the other in an increasingly diverse and competitive labor market
- 4) Improving morale and productivity of the organization
- 5) Avoiding losing good employees
- 6) Avoiding under-using and under-valuing able workforce
- 7) Managing the workforce better
- 8) Developing good practice

VII. CONCLUSION

Organizations are able to meet projected goals and objectives a lot faster as there are diverse people working toward them. To what degree an organization both embraces the ethos of equal opportunities and backs it up with an

investment in sound policies and practices may be expected to have an impact on both the progress of employees and their experience in the workplace in the organization. Concurrently, HR takes on a high impact role in the organization and is viewed as the driver of the Equal Opportunity culture and has a visible impact on overall capability of the people in the organization.

REFERENCES

- [1] Boyd Childress. Encyclopedia of Business. *Reference for Business*. [Online]. 2nd ed. pp. 1-13. Available: <http://www.referenceforbusiness.com/encyclopedia/Ent-Fac/Equal-Opportunity.html#ixzz2EpDgBBu8>
- [2] Michael Armstrong. (June 2009). Handbook of Human Resource Management Practice. *Kogan Oage*. [Online]. 11th ed. pp. 111-118. Available: http://my.safaribooksonline.com/book/-/.../6...hr.../the_change_agent_role
- [3] Wikipedia.org. [Online]. Available: <http://www.wikipedia.org/>
- [4] A. Mathews, "Diversity: a Principle of Human Resource Management," *Academic Journal, Public Personnel Management*, vol. 27, no. 2, pp. 351-367, Summer 1998.
- [5] B. D'Netto and A. Sohal, "Human Resource Practices and Workforce Diversity: an Empirical Assessment," *International Journal of Manpower, MCB UP Ltd.*, vol. 20, no. 8, pp. 530-547, Dec 1999.
- [6] C. Agocs and C. Burr, "Employment Equity, Affirmative Action and Managing Diversity: Assessing the differences," *International Journal of Manpower, MCB UP Ltd.*, vol. 17, no. 4/5, pp. 30-45, June 1996.
- [7] F. Dobbin, "Inventing Equal Opportunity," *Princeton University Press*, vol. 24, no. 4, 194-215, Aug 2010.
- [8] M. Manuel London, "Change Agents: New Roles and Innovation Strategies for Human Resource Professionals," *Jossey-Bass Business and Management Series*, vol. 22, pp. 256-269, Aug 1988.
- [9] T. Cox and S. Blake, "Managing Cultural Diversity: Implications for Organizational Competitiveness," *The Executive, Academy of Management*, vol. 5, no. 3, pp. 45-56, Aug 1991.
- [10] S. Sylvie Loriaux, "Global Equality of Opportunity: a Proposal," *Journal of International Relations and Development, Palgrave Macmillan*, vol. 11, pp. 1-28, Oct. 2008.
- [11] D. O. Ulrich, *Human Resource Champions*, Harvard Business Review Press, 1997, pp. 23-152.
- [12] D. O. Ulrich and J. Wayne Brockbank, *The HR Value Proposition*, Harvard Business Review Press, 1998, pp. 2-7.
- [13] H. F. Malik, *A Practical Guide to Equal Opportunities*, 3rd ed., Nelson Thornes Ltd., 2003 pp. 17-19.



K. Raghavi was born on August 12, 1984. She is from Chennai, India. Her educational Background - B.E (Information Technology) from Anna University in 2005, Chennai, MBA (Human Resources & Systems) from Anna University in 2007, Chennai, Diploma in Training & Development from India Society of Training & Development (ISTD), New Delhi, Pursuing Ph.D. in Sathyabama University, Chennai. Major field of study - human resources.

She is an Assistant Manager - HR in YES PeopleTech Solutions Pvt. Ltd. Chennai. She has published a paper titled: A Study on the effect of Employee Empowerment through Equal Opportunity Practices (Chennai, Tamilnadu, Sathyabama University, 2012).

Ms. Raghavi K has won awards like Chairman's Award (2007), Spirit of eNoah Award (2008) and Star Award (2009).



N. Gopinathan was born on March 14, 1971. He is from Chennai, India. His educational Background is M.Com, M.Phil., Ph.D. He is an Associate Professor, Department of Management Studies, Sathyabama University, Chennai.