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CHAPTER 1

The Case for Strategic People Management

David Hall

"Experience without theory is blind but theory without experience is mere intellectual play."

The above quotation is attributed (Anon., 1962: 11) to the German philosopher, Immanuel Kant (1724–1804), who is regarded as one of the foremost thinkers of the Enlightenment or Age of Reason, the cultural movement of the eighteenth century which proffered the power of reason as a means of reform and of the advancement of knowledge. Many versions of Kant’s maxim have followed as a basis for developing arguments about theory and action in diverse areas such as politics, industrial relations and education. So, why use this quotation to introduce a book about strategic people management? This quotation embodies the beliefs of the authors of this book about the nature of management (as the practice of activities) and about the epistemological considerations (about choice of methods) for acquiring knowledge that support learning. The foundations for this book lay in the shared ethos of the authors about education in business and management and about the need to consider theory and practice together, particularly how they influence each other, to develop knowledge and understanding in order to progress in both areas, which is the essence of Kant’s hypotheses. All three authors of this book worked outside higher education before becoming educationalists later in their careers after gaining management experience, and this common experience has shaped their shared views.

The catalyst for this book was the realisation that the Business School at the University of Portsmouth, UK, had produced a valuable learning resource that would benefit a wide audience. That resource is the Human Resource Bulletin: Research and Practice, published by the University of Portsmouth and the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) Portsmouth Group, which, since being first published in 2006, has featured many excellent case studies on people management in which practice has been linked to theory. These cases written by academics, managers and postgraduate students enable learners to link theory to practice and vice versa, as a basis for critique and conceptualisation, which are essential for developing high-level learning. The cases also describe examples of management practice and the experiences of those involved. One of the aims of this book is the knowledge transfer of intellectual capital by
the dissemination of the experience of researchers and practitioners, based on their work in the workplace and academia. The rest of this chapter outlines the purpose and structure of this book, who it is written for and how it can be used by different groups of readers, including learners and practitioners.

**Strategic people management**

Some of the best known writers on management describe the people management activities to define the role, for example, Drucker (1989), Fayol (1949) and Mintzberg (1973). Today, management continues to be defined by the tasks which individuals in roles of responsibility and authority carry out to meet the objectives of the organisations they work for. Definitions of ‘strategic people management’ are harder to come by in the literature, although most academics and managers would have a sense of what is meant by strategic people management. The following extract provides insight into the meaning of strategic people management from an organisational perspective; it appears on the web pages of Local Government (LG) Improvement Development, an organisation which supports improvement and innovation across local government in England:

The national local government workforce strategy advises councils to adopt a ‘strategic people management’ approach to ensure that their workforce is focused on achieving the council’s objectives and improving services. An effective workforce strategy, integrated with the overall corporate strategic plan, will help councils ensure that they have the right people, in the right places, with the right skills, at the right time. This is often known as a ‘people strategy’. This strategic approach provides a launch pad for organisational development.

The LG website goes on to explain that a workforce strategy is also called a ‘people’ or ‘HR’ (human resources) strategy that focuses on people management interventions that impact on organisational performance. For the purpose of this book, strategic people management is defined as the coordinated planning and activity of people resources in an organisation to achieve longer-term performance outcomes. Strategic people management is also known as ‘strategic human resources management’ (strategic HRM), which features widely in HR literature and has several definitions. Schuler’s (1992: 18) definition of strategic HRM is: ‘The understanding of all those activities affecting the behaviour of individuals in their efforts to formulate and implement the strategic needs of the business’. Boxall and Purcell (2011) argue that strategic HRM is concerned with explaining how HRM influences organisational performance, and they provide a comprehensive and critical treatment of this subject. Academics at the Aston Centre for Human Resources (2008) define strategic HRM as: ‘Broadly speaking, strategic HRM is about systematically linking people with organisations; more specifically it is about the integration of HRM strategies into the corporate strategies’. These various descriptions of strategic people management and strategic HRM explain the subject matter of this book: how organisations strategically manage their people resources to influence performance outcomes.
‘Strategic’ means taking a long-term view with regard to planning and implementation, aimed at positioning an organisation to achieve a desired future state. Strategy is concerned with the capability and readiness of an organisation-as-a-whole system (‘holistic’) to influence stakeholder behaviour through a range of integrated interventions to achieve performance outcomes at all levels. ‘Strategic people management’ was chosen to appear in the title of this book because it has been written for anyone who has an interest in how people management contributes towards delivering performance outcomes in organisations. This includes students doing HR and other management courses, and HR and line managers, many of whom are working in partnership in organisations across all sectors. The use of the book and how it can be helpful to a range of readers is explained later in this chapter.

The link with performance

Most descriptions of strategic people management, including definitions of strategic HRM, make the inextricable link between this management activity and performance. From these descriptions, it is clear that the purpose of strategic people management is to influence the achievement of desirable performance outcomes. Strategic interventions by their very nature should complement each other while coordinating employee activity (behaviour) at all levels to focus on organisational aims, that is, to ‘align’ individual and group behaviour with the purpose of the organisation. Research investigating the relationship between people management and performance has identified a number of key elements to create a ‘performance culture’, which achieves alignment by encouraging and supporting employee behaviour that is congruent with organisational purpose.

Purcell, Kinnie, Hutchinson, Rayton and Swart (2003) report that a clear mission or ‘Big Idea’ underpinned by values is a key ingredient for creating a culture that supports organisational direction and behaviour that positively impact on performance. Purcell et al. identified a range of HR policies and practices, which if used together (described as ‘bundling’) can encourage employees to make decisions about their behaviour which will result in high levels of performance. People management policies applied in this way are called high-performance work practices (HPWP). Eleven broad areas of policy and practice were identified: job security, career opportunity, performance appraisal, training and development, recruitment and selection, pay satisfaction, work–life balance, job challenge and autonomy, teamwork, involvement and communication. These policy areas feature in ‘The People and Performance model’ described in the report (Purcell et al., 2003: 7) showing how the application of these influence employee motivation, job satisfaction and organisational commitment to effect decision-making about behaviour leading to high levels of performance. This model can be viewed as a strategic people management model, assuming it exists within a strategic perspective, that is, the ‘Big Idea’.

The role of HR and front-line management

The importance of the role of HR management is clear as people-management policy design and implementation are important factors in creating
a high-performance culture. What also becomes clear from this and other research is the crucial role played by front-line managers in the effective implementation of HR policies and practices, as the ‘employee-facing’ part of the organisation (Purcell and Hutchinson, 2007). Front-line managers are ‘champions’ of the values that are promoted in their organisations as guides to expectations of employee behaviour. How front-line managers treat (and lead) employees when implementing policy is key to maintaining trust and gaining commitment from the people who report to them. It is important that HR managers and line managers work together, as well as support employees, when implementing policy, if it is to be effective. This approach to HR and line managers coordinating their efforts to deliver organisational objectives across strategic and operational areas is described by Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) as ‘business partnering’. Other researchers in this area, including Sung and Ashton (2005), have highlighted the significance of leadership in creating and shaping organisations that apply HPWP’s to achieve high performance, calling these organisations ‘high performance work organisations’ (HPWOs). In their report Sung and Ashton identify three broad areas for ‘bundling’ HPWP’s: human resource practices, high involvement as well as reward and commitment.

The challenge of causality

One of the most challenging and controversial aspects of research in this area is the question of causality, that is, a factor or factors that causally affect or affects others, resulting in certain outcomes. This can be particularly difficult when assessing the effect of management interventions or policy on performance. How confident can one be that the implementation of a particular intervention or policy will result in a change in performance? Consider all the various factors that may influence performance in a particular situation at a given time. The issue of attribution becomes especially problematic when considering people outcomes that have no tangible value or empirical means of measurement; for example, how do you measure creativity or cooperation? There are no easy solutions to this problem but it is an area where the concept of ‘human capital’ has come to the fore as an approach. Human capital is an economic concept that asserts that people are assets and have economic value like other resources in an organisation (Becker, 1993). This value is created by the expertise and experience of people who enable them to be productive. This approach is based on defining appropriate metrics that are viable and reliable and that can be used to help in attributing an employee’s contribution to creating value and to the performance of the organisation. Some organisations have developed ‘HR scorecards’ and ‘Workforce scorecards’, forms of performance management systems, in an attempt to measure and manage the contribution of their people to the value of those organisations. Such methods and tools can be helpful and, some would argue, are essential for organisations to effectively strategically manage people. This approach is also fraught with difficulties, which centre on the viability and reliability of the metrics and how the data is interpreted. Finally there is always the ‘human factor’ to consider in any management intervention, which revolves around the perception of people towards such methods, which can lead
to unintended and problematic consequences as well as to benefits for employees and employers. The emotional and behavioural response of employees to changes in the way they work and the relationship they and other groups of stakeholders have with organisations can never be underestimated. The unwritten understanding between employees and employers regarding mutual expectations, known as the ‘psychological contract’ (Rousseau, 1995), remains an important consideration in managing people and performance.

The ‘Big Idea’ behind this book

First and foremost this book is a learning resource that has been designed to develop knowledge and understanding in, what is for most people, a vocational subject, by encouraging critical examination of the link between theory and practice. Because of the applied nature of this subject area, the practical aspect of management is highly significant and plays an extremely important role in the learning process. In 1975 David Kolb and Roger Fry described a model of experiential learning where the learning process is a continuous one (‘The Learning Cycle’) of four sequenced stages: conceptualisation (theorising), experimentation (trying things out), experience (practice) and reflection (harvesting the learning). The learning cycle involving theory and practice continually modifies our original understanding, which is the basis for learning and development. This model offers only one theory of learning but it is a prominent one that is widely acknowledged and respected in the learning profession, and many learning interventions are developed, based on this description of the learning process. The model offers a theory of experiential learning where experience based on what an individual actually does is a vital part of the process and is not only particularly relevant to vocational or applied subjects that are taught in the classroom but also to other forms of learning which take place outside the classroom, such as work-based learning and coaching. Kolb highlighted that it does not matter where in the learning cycle an individual starts, as long as they progress through all stages of the process. Individuals will start the process at different stages based on their particular situation and experience, even if they are part of the same group of learners. Formal learning, such as attending lectures, may as a starting point, consider theories and ‘set’ the learning process at the conceptualisation stage for the same group of learners, but this does not have to be the starting point for all learners. Work-based learning typically often starts at the experience (practice) stage.

For employees in the workplace and in the classroom, the ‘experience’ stage of the learning process can be readily accessed as it is typically based on the job an individual does (or has done in the past) and on their experience of being part of the organisation they work in. The ‘experience’ part of the learning process can be more of a challenge for full-time undergraduate students who tend to have less ‘work time’ and experience of organisations. For the latter group, case studies and research articles based on organisations play a vital role in bringing the ‘experience’ to the learner to facilitate the learning process. This format will be familiar to anyone who has attended a course in business and management, and for many learners it is the exceptional case study or research article that
often sticks in the mind for years after the course. Of course case studies and research articles can be just as important to employees in the workplace and in the classroom, but there can be different reasons for that – for example, insight into what other organisations and managers are doing – but the purpose for doing so is exactly the same, that is to learn.

The aim of this book is clear – to facilitate the learning process for different groups of learners by presenting a number of cases that provide experiential insight and, with the help of the theory presented in each chapter, to enable critical consideration of the connection between theory and practice, and vice versa. The activities and discussion that follow each case are intended to encourage readers to think ‘critically’, that is to consider different perspectives and points of view (arguments) based on the case content and theory, thus facilitating the learning process. Finally another aim of this book is to develop curiosity and questioning by the reader, that is, to sow the seeds of research investigation.

Who can benefit from this book

This book would be a valuable resource to learners studying people management as a module on a course at level 5 and above, which includes undergraduate and postgraduate courses at university. Degree and professional award courses, as a part of which people management and HR are taught, could include Business Administration, Business Studies, Business and Management, Human Resources Management, Organisational Development, Coaching as well as Leadership and Management, but there will be many more courses which include a people management component. Learners on full-time and part-time courses, including distance learners, will find that the cases presented in this book, which are mainly based on organisational practice, offer an extremely useful insight into applied people management and HRM. The case presented in each chapter (some chapters feature two or three cases) is preceded by an outline of the main theory and context surrounding the case topic, supported with references to a range of literature, including academic textbooks, research articles, professional and institutional publications, management journals and web-based sources. These references provide more comprehensive literature coverage and are a good starting point for researching the subject matter.

Undergraduate and postgraduate students and learners on professional management courses in business and management usually undertake a major piece of research to complete their studies, which may take the form of a dissertation, independent study or management project. These projects typically require the learner to prepare a proposal and carry out research in a particular topic or issue, which could be in the area of people management or HRM. There are two specific areas related to such research projects which this book can help with:

- **The choice of topic or issue for the project.** Many students struggle to come up with a suitable research topic, particularly undergraduate students who have limited experience of working for organisations. The subjects covered in this book and the cases provide a valuable source of potential ideas, and perhaps even inspiration, for research projects because many of these cases
are based on actual research into management practice or discuss findings from a particular area of research. The cases and activities which follow lead to other questions about the subject areas and can uncover other issues that can be explored.

- How to carry out research. Many of these cases are exemplars of good research, albeit in a summarised format, and provide helpful examples of how to design, implement and report effective research. In many universities and other learning institutions, the research or management project is preceded by a module on research methods which requires the student to prepare a proposal outlining and justifying their research design. Many of the cases in this book would assist first-time researchers with their project approach.

Another group which will find this book a useful resource are practising managers involved or interested in people management. HR managers and line managers can learn from the experience of other managers and researchers into management practice. Managers may face issues similar to those described in the cases and will find it useful to learn what approach other organisations took and why. This approach supports work-based learning and ‘action learning’ as learning interventions in the workplace. This book aims to transfer knowledge through the dissemination of management practice for the benefit of all readers of this book.

How to use this book

The chapters and cases can be read in any order, allowing learners to simply go to any chapter they are particularly interested in. For any chapter, readers can read the ‘theory’ that precedes the case or go straight to the case; it depends on what the reader wishes to gain from the chapter and certain outcomes from reading this book have been discussed above, for example, a final-year undergraduate student deciding on a topic for their research project will be seeking different outcomes from reading the book compared to an HR manager who is interested in how an organisation has approached a specific policy area. This highlights the book’s versatility as a learning and knowledge resource, and how the individual needs of the reader determines how the book is used.

Most chapters will cover more than one subject area but the coverage of each subject within a chapter area may vary. Some chapters span several subject areas to different degrees. The chapter titles and subject areas covered in each title are summarised in Table 1.1 at the end of this chapter. All chapters, with the exception of this introductory chapter, describe at least one case and several chapters present two or more cases that cover similar subject areas. Each chapter starts with a discussion of the main theory and context associated with the main subject area, providing academic underpinning for the case(s) which follows. The bibliography at the end of each chapter provides useful sources in the academic literature and elsewhere. The case or cases that follow the theoretical treatment provide valuable ‘experiential’ insight which is focused on organisational interventions and research, enabling readers to reflect on and consider the relationship between
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theory and practice. The activities and discussion questions which follow each case are designed with a number of outcomes in mind:

- To develop knowledge and understanding of the theory and to make connections between different theories.
- To encourage critical thinking and expression about the connection between theory and practice.
- To facilitate learning in different ways and at different levels, including individual and group or ‘social’ learning, particularly by sharing experiences (experiential learning) within a learning group or set.
- To raise further questions and spark curiosity to encourage further investigation and learning.
- To bring enjoyment and fun to learning – for example, divide a class in two and ask each side to debate an issue, one ‘for’ and the other ‘against’. A simple but stimulating exercise that involves everyone in the learning process.

The book is versatile enough to be used for different modes of teaching delivery and learning. It can be used in the classroom as a casebook to support learning in the subject areas mentioned previously. The use of cases is particularly suited to seminar teaching and assignment work. The nature of the chapter material and activities which follow are suitable to differentiate learning based on the mix of knowledge and experience that will be found in most learning groups. Similarly this book can be used outside the classroom in the workplace for learning and development. Learning groups or ‘sets’ are a common form of intervention for organisational learning, as is the use of ‘action learning’ as a learning intervention which is very closely based on the principles of the learning cycle described by Kolb (1984). The activities and discussion at the end of each chapter should be used in such a way that caters for the specific learning needs and priorities of a particular group. In this way differentiated learning can be encouraged within a group.

There is a ‘Learners’ Guide’ which accompanies this book which is a web-based support resource for lecturers, leaders of learning groups and learners. This guide features indicative guidance or approaches to the questions and activities posed at the end of each chapter.

Acknowledgements

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