



PROGRESSIVELY ETHICAL: THE EVOLUTION OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

It is possible to see the present form of the HRM profession as cumulative incorporation of the ethical concerns of the society and a fine tuning thereby. The article delineates the ethical concerns of the society being considered and enacted into law relating to management of Human Resources. Such identification of a common streak, enables prediction and acceleration of the growth of the profession in a multicultural world with its added complexity of having to cater to the needs and challenges of a scenario where the domain is subjected to rapid transformation.

KeyWords: *HRM, Ethical Considerations, Law, Transformation, Bias, Fairness, Evolution of Profession, Natural Justice.*

Introduction

The management of people is as old as organized living. And as organized living has transformed over the years, the HRM function has also been subjected to transformation. The function's transformation on ethical lines and its significance in a multicultural world is less explored (Martín-Alcázar et al , 2012).

The practicing HR manager would well agree that beyond the numbers, systems, calculations predictions and posturing that typifies this particular function, the pinning decisions are in the final analysis, a careful balancing of values (Keenoy and Schwan,1990) often involving the conflicting interests of the many different stakeholders. If it was not so, there would very well have been too little of the development of the profession as such. One hears often of computers taking over the HR function but never fully (Lengnick-Hall, and Moritz, 2003).

At the base of it, is the fundamental structural economic element that whatever is the combined import to the employee of the rewards in its various forms is invariably a cost to the company (Martocchio, 2011) which the organisation constantly seeks to reduce. This dialectic lends the necessary tension to the function, for if in too less or too high a proportion the very same tension would be dysfunctional to the system as a whole (Kim & Noh, 2022).

Ethics in its simplest terms, is subject involving right or wrong in its various ramifications (Pojman & Fieser, 2016). In a scenario where everything is in black and white there is no ethical dilemma (Aroskar,1980). And the constant flux in the environment, especially the present imperative of an integrated world, provides the necessary grist to the human resources mill which tends never to settle the issue of the proper and the appropriate. At the societal level it involves balancing the self-interest with that of the larger whole and at the international level it involves finding newer ways of cultural compatibility and integration. One needs to recognize the transition from concerns of a culturally relativistic world to the recognition of the need for a framework of universal moral principles (Bowie, 1993).



Some of the early HR management practices had the quality of slave driving (Kanigel, 2005; Saunders, 2013). The profession has come a long way and surely neither the conditions under which that model of human organization prevailed nor the model are any longer acceptable. This is also to indicate that what was legal under that milieu is no longer so and all the more indicates the changing nature of ethics itself and therefore the imperative of changes to come. Additionally, the ethical dilemmas of an integrated world are likely more complex than the earlier one (Bowie, 1993).

One could therefore safely predict that the affairs of men manifested so acutely in the business organization as a vehicle of the economic structure (Tajani, 2006), would require even further changes in the practice of the profession tempered by prevailing climates and ever refined notions of what is right and what is wrong, including the distinctly different views arising out of cultural nuances (Wines & Napier, 1992).

Ethical concerns in manpower sourcing

The oldest of the dilemmas in public life is that of nepotism and favouritism (Nardi. et al, 2000). In modern times, the function has been further tempered by the requirement against discrimination enshrined in many a nation's constitution. Positively, the function is also required not only not to discriminate but also to be active in giving opportunity to those historically deprived. The idea of a positive imperative is well captured in the terminology, affirmative action (Crosby et al, 2006) in the west and reservation policy in India.

The development of a system where men can enter freely into agreements to offer one's labour (Genicot, 2002), is itself an improvement over the previously prevalent notions of serfdom and still previously of slavery. The development of democratic notions and industrialization that requires specialized skills often involving long periods of rigorous training, are two forces that shaped new social relations involving free entry and exit through contracts (Delors, 1998). Clearly the ascent of individualism over collectivism (Triandis, 2001) is a concomitant of these forces.

Similarly, avoidance of discrimination is at the heart of legislations requiring equal remuneration and the requirement to notify vacancies in some countries is intended to provide justice at the societal level and there is no overstating that both fall into the ethics agenda (Adams, 1997).

The development of psychological instruments that are more and more fine-tuned and those that measure what they are intended to reduce the bias likely in selection (Winstanley & Stuart-Smith, 1996) is another instance of addressing the concern. The reduction of bias is an issue of right versus wrong and therefore a matter of ethics.

The notion of a formal induction

The sociological basis of induction is the practice of socialization of new members and as such is a natural process. However, in the official world, socialization is a deliberate and artificial process leading to acclimatization and acculturation (Baard et al, 2014). It is equivalent to the initiation into the adult world prevalent in primitive societies. At the societal level, the process enables a smoothening of the transition. The objective of enabled integration with the larger whole and assistance in doing so, implies an act of facilitation. The development of this function in the official world is not only from the instrumental point of view but also from the ethical point of view that one must make circumstances



conductive for the newcomer to integrate into the group. Sometimes this point is clear only when pitted against its antithesis of the malpractice of ragging.

Likely pitfalls and their avoidance in Performance appraisal.

A major concern in performance appraisal is avoidance of bias (Prowse, & Prowse, 2009). To develop an objective measure of performance is a dilemma in the function and no amount of fine tuning of the instruments can avoid occurrence of bias as any practicing manager would vouch. The matter is complicated by the perceptual biases of halo effect, horn effect, recency effect and stereotyping. That there are chances of bias and therefore having identified the possibility, an attempt to mitigate the same, makes it a matter of right versus wrong.

The development of techniques such as 360-degree appraisal is an attempt to reduce the dilemma. The underlying assumption is that one cannot avoid bias however hard one tries but not all can be biased in the same direction. Therefore, an appraisal by all those who are hierarchically, laterally and diagonally related is expected to cancel out any bias to give as clear or less biased a view as possible. This is akin to triangulation a tool used in research and civil engineering. It involves collection, analysis and of information from multiple angles (Waldman & Bowen, 1998) reducing or cancelling out bias.

Fairness in Compensation and conditions

On analysis of the history of legislation, one could see that those enactments are actually developments over ethical concerns in the course of time. Practices which were ethically likely to be inferior or exploitative were sought to be corrected through enactment into law in a way by the society through its collective body of government. What Robert Owen felt as ethically just and others felt incipiently right was incorporated as the Health, Safety and Welfare provisions in subsequent legislations (Yeo, 1971).

The legislations relating to wages are another example to tacit ethical injunctions codified into law. So are laws relating to compensation upon harm, injury and / or death. The tacit injunctions in the latter are that harm in the course of work is fair and conscientious to be compensated.

In recent years Welfare and Safety concerns also incorporated notions of freedom of speech as in the workers' right to warn about imminent danger (Yang et al, 2015) for instance. Clearly these are subjects that would still be left to the discretion of employers (Lens, 2008), otherwise.

The dilemma of Industrial Relations

The function of Industrial Relations poses a special dilemma. The dilemma proceeds from the fact that the position of the parties is as in the setting of a game and it becomes imperative for the players not to reveal their true intentions. IR as a game therefore relies on the technique of 'posturing' (Dhyani, 1982). It requires the player to be adept in not revealing fully. Obviously, the ethical requirement of having to be truthful and honest does not work in the context. However, it is interesting to note that even so (and in fact only in this domain) alone there developed what is called a code of ethics (Sah, 2015). It is very interesting in the sense that where there is a likelihood of less and less possibility of ethics there develops a code of ethics. In a way, like any other game here the development is in the direction of codification of the rules of the game (McCarthy et al., 2011).

The other provisions in the legislation relating to Industrial Relations are also falling into the category of rules of the game. A rule for entering into strikes and its antithesis, a rule for temporary loss of work



due to failure and inability, a rule for separation due to excess manpower a rule for closure, a rule for re-entry in the event of a subsequent betterment in circumstances, a rule as to what behaviours are to be treated as misconducts, a rule as to what one is entitled to when one is suspended pending enquiry and so on (Shabir et al, 2014).

The nature of natural justice

It is interesting to note that in the definition of ethics as distinct from other related terms such as morality and law, ethics is treated as what is naturally just. Morality has the force of other systems such as religion just as law has the force of the collective will through the legislature, whereas ethics has the connotation of what is naturally or intuitively just. All three of them has as its base a sense of right versus wrong (Yadav, 2016).

Thus, any person against whom a misconduct is alleged is to be given an opportunity to be heard and no one shall be a judge if that one has an interest in the case. A violation of these are sure to be treated as unethical or naturally unjust. And within this rule itself there are injunctions with ethical connotations such as, until proven guilty, the person is ‘an alleged’ (Kumar et al., 2009) and never ‘the culprit’ nor can any such term with derogatory connotations be used.

The correction of scientific management

It is possible to see scientific management separating from the human beings and being accused of dehumanization and glorifying of productivity alone. A criticism of scientific management is its blindness to human elements in favour of the machine, techniques and physical conditions (Spaulding, 1961). Ironically the very same quest to find the effect of physical factors led to the discovery of the human elements and the human relations school.

However, it is possible to see the benefits of scientific management as in ‘higher wages at lower levels of efforts due to increased productivity’ and the eventual replacement of sheer brawn power with brain power as in automation and concern with comfortable conditions as in ergonomics (Dalcher, 2018). The point is that the quest for the human angle as in the later concepts of job enrichment and autonomy with underlying notions of what is appropriate, all of which draws the human being to the centre again.

Conclusion

The attempt in the foregoing was to look at the development of the profession of Human Resource Management from an ethical point of view. It is possible to see the present form of the profession as accumulative incorporation of the ethical concerns of the society and a fine tuning thereby. Given a common streak, it may be possible to predict and accelerate the growth of the profession in a multicultural world with its added complexity of having to cater to the needs and challenges of a multicultural scenario as well as changes such as digital transformation (Vardarlier, 2020) for instance.

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