

Can A Human Resources Model in Schools
Result in Increased Student Achievement?

Terry Smith

Graduate School of Education and Psychology
Pepperdine University
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Abstract: Hiring and support practices in businesses serve to meet the needs of the organization in general. Potential employees are chosen for being a good fit in experiences, abilities, and in having social compatibility with the company culture. The intent is for long term productivity and service toward the goals of the company. In schools, the hiring and support process is often such that new teachers are interviewed only by administrators, are assigned to schools without benefit of having met potential new colleagues, then are left to find their own way while being held accountable for student achievement. In addition, it is common practice to assign teachers to grade levels based on availability and need, rather than on experience with a particular age of student. The result of these hiring practices can mean low motivation, low productivity, and low morale when teachers find themselves under long term expectations to meet state and district assessment standards. To help increase employee satisfaction, which can lead to higher productivity, and in turn to higher student achievement, schools should consider implementing hiring and support practices common in human resources approaches.

Introduction

The success of an organization is directly related to employee personal successes: a motivated employee is a productive employee, which tends to produce increased overall productivity in the organization (Oswald, Proto, & Sgroi, 2008; Happy, 2004; Ledford, 1999). Research has shown that people in a good mood in the workplace tend to exhibit (1) increased problem-solving skills, (2) tendency toward helpfulness, and (3) positive attitudes to coworkers (Argyle, 1987).

When we read about the hiring practices and work environments of companies like Apple, Google, or other highly successful computer-based companies, it is easy to think of words like innovative, creative, employee-friendly, high salaries, and so forth. Even if we don't really know what it might be like to work for companies like this, we tend to imagine flexible hours, pleasant campus-like workplaces, acceptance of differences, and a high regard, simultaneously, for both individual and team discourse. We might say that Apple, for instance, has figured out that one key to success is a high regard for human relations, of "using systematic knowledge of human behavior to improve personal, job, and career effectiveness" (DuBrin, 2008). It appears that when employees feel respected, they work harder and with more passion, which translates into achieving the overall goals of the organization. DuBrin (2008) states that when a company provides extra care and concern for its employees, real benefits result down the line, such as a higher quality of customer service. He adds that removing watchdog or controlling positions, and allowing employees to be encouraged by the natural peer pressure within their working teams results in improved employee performance. Surveys of employee reaction to the interview process at Apple describe a casual question and answer session with managers as well as with prospective peers (Vault, 2009), a common business practice which allows potential new hires to interact with potential team members. The initial interview meeting is the first time that both

parties begin to develop a feel for the possibilities of the future: does the employee want to be at this company, and does this company want this new employee? The face to face, the tour, the overview of the new company all provide feedback for the prospective employee, while at the same time giving the employer a chance to observe how the interviewee reacts during this introductory process.

According to Losey et al. (2005), human resources professionals, in recruiting and selecting candidates, “help identify the best sources for such candidates and (if necessary) the best outside experts who can help in this identification and in reaching desired individuals. This step is critical to ensuring a cost-effective approach to obtaining a pool of desirable talent.”

Assuming all goes well, and the interviewee has the proper credentials for the job, as well as has met the social expectations of the hiring group, the person is hired. At this stage, the first hurdle has been cleared and both parties are in agreement with the new situation. If we assume that the human resources department as well as the specific work division for the company have done their work, then the new employee is now informed of expectations for benefits, training, and job responsibilities. For the future, as the new employee fulfills his or her job duties, an evaluation process will help track his or her progress and accountability, again, a process which has normally been explained upfront to the new employee.

Interviewing and Hiring in Public Schools

By contrast, the interviewing, hiring, and accountability processes at a school district in the midwestern United States are markedly different from the business environment description presented above. The situation in this example school district, which we'll call HPS, is consistent with practices found in many other districts across the United States per the author's

experiences teaching in three different states: Texas, Illinois, and Missouri. Additional information gained from the author's participation in educational social networks, such as Classroom 2.0 and ClassBlogmeister, provide further verification of hiring practices in schools.

The New Teacher

An experienced classroom teacher, Mrs. Lane, was hired by the HPS school district for the 2009-2010 school year. Mrs. Lane had 26 years of experience in the elementary classroom teaching grades 1 and 2; and she had worked mostly in upper income districts around Des Moines, Iowa, where she considered herself an early childhood literacy expert. The hiring process began in July, while schools were not in session. At the district office, Mrs. Lane was interviewed by the curriculum coordinator and two building principals, one from AB School, the other from EF School. During the interview, Mrs. Lane expressed her desire to teach younger children and offered a portfolio of her past work and successes. She was asked very few questions by the panel and was given a packet of informational sheets about district policy. Her interviewers related that they were very impressed with Mrs. Lane's background and they would contact her soon with results of the interview. This concluded the interview process for Mrs. Lane. She had met only with administrators in the board office, and had not seen or visited any of the schools in the district. In early August, Mrs. Lane received a letter with the offer to teach at EF school which serves a population of low-income, at-risk students. The only opening was in grade 5, an age group with which she had had no previous experience. The school, she was told, had a reputation as being one of the hardest, most challenging places to teach in the city.

The New Job

Although she had no experience with grade 5, and all of her professional supplies accrued over 26 years of teaching were geared for 1st and 2nd grade students, Mrs. Lane accepted the offer. Her small classroom came equipped with an interactive white board and projector, and six classroom computers. Among the packet of district policy papers she had been given, was one listing the expected competencies of all district employees. Among those competencies was the ability to use technology effectively to stimulate learning and to increase student achievement. From the beginning, she had difficulty using her technology equipment. Because her new colleagues were so absorbed in starting the new year, there was little time to provide assistance. Mrs. Lane quickly discovered that many other teachers didn't really know how to use their classroom technology and often complained about the lack of help or training. Among the expectations of using technology, was that teachers would maintain records on spreadsheets for benchmark reading results for students, and these would be added at specified intervals, a process that was never fully demonstrated to her. During regular classroom sessions, Mrs. Lane was not sure how often she should be using her interactive whiteboard. She assumed that other teachers were using the whiteboard and projector for most of their lessons during the day. Without training, she defaulted to using her classroom scanner to capture magazine articles to display on the whiteboard, only to be criticized by the curriculum director for not using the associated software that came with the equipment. Of course, Mrs. Lane had not been shown how to use the software, and was therefore relying on her own limited abilities with technology. When Mrs. Lane asked for training, the principal replied that the technology people would stop by and talk to her on their regularly scheduled time of Friday mornings. Even though a technology person did visit, the short and hurried nature of the interaction left Mrs. Lane still

frustrated with the expectations. Additionally, much of the vocabulary used by the technology person did not make sense to her.

In sum, how might we extrapolate the level of student learning that may result from a teacher out of her grade-level experience, with little support, and experiencing high levels of stress to be accountable? In probability terms, the chances would be low at best.

How Would a Human Resources Approach Have Helped?

This scenario is not uncommon in public schools. Here, the teacher's grade 1 and 2 experiences did not fulfill the grade level needs of a grade 5 classroom teacher. In a business setting, this would likely have been stated as *not a good match* of skills and current needs. When Mrs. Lane started at EF, she had not met any of her future peers, so she had no beginning mentor contact other than knowing the name of the other grade 5 teacher, whom she met for the first time on the opening day of school. Had this been a business, Mrs. Lane would normally have interviewed with several other teachers, would have toured the school, would have asked questions pertaining to procedure, policies, and technology use at EF school. Her new potential peers would have also have had the opportunity to evaluate her as a possible good fit, or not, with the current group of teachers and culture. Because this did not happen, Mrs. Lane felt like a stranger during the first few weeks of school when she was having the most trouble getting started.

As the year proceeded, district assessments happened with increased frequency; worries about meeting the measured adequate yearly progress (AYP) of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law weighed heavily upon all teachers at EF school, but even heavier on Mrs. Lane. She was spending many late nights preparing lessons and searching for resources. She was aware of the

accountability expectations, and remained frustrated with the immense effort she had to do to catch up to the grade 5 curriculum, as well as the expectations that she would be using technology as a daily part of her profession. She turned to peers and principal for help, and although she received sympathy, she did not get the help she needed. The principal related that in time she would catch on, that everyone at the school was one big family, and soon things would be better. This was not the case. Things did not get better.

The district office bills itself as an employee-friendly environment. According to the superintendent, the doors are always open to teachers to stop in and share their concerns. But when Mrs. Lane asked for help through the proper chain of command, that is via the school principal, she discovered that there was no help available. The district had no formal human resources function or contact point, other than regarding issues of pay, personal days, and insurance. When Mrs. Lane emailed the technology department, she found a similar situation. The technology department only had training programs during the summer months, but none available for immediate help. If she needed help, they said, she should fill out the online technology trouble report, a task that no one had showed her how to do.

In a situation with an effective real human resources function, Mrs. Lane would not have been hired for her present position. Mrs. Lane's training, according to Losey (2005, p. 128) should have covered both work and culture. With adequate HR presence, she would have been helped to plan her own training needs, and she would have been given assistance for melding with the school and district culture.

Implications for Change

This case study began with the idea that a successful organization results, in part, from the degree to which employees feel they are having personal success. Motivation can come from

different places: from peers, from management, from the community at large. For overall productivity to remain consistent or to increase, the organization must have a significant number of motivated employees (Oswald, Proto, & Sgroi, 2008). Considering education, and a school as the organization, the idea holds. Teachers are held to rigid levels of accountability in classrooms of varying ability-level students, while they also endure high levels of stress from district expectations and NCLB targets and negative publicity. While it is mandated that she be accountable, she is given little assistance or training to help ensure that she will be able to fulfill her duties. The support that would normally come from an effective human resources department is absent in this case study. Given the available resources and set up, it can be expected that job stresses will remain high for employees like Mrs. Lane. She must rely on her own wiles to negotiate a successful path through a disorganized and unsupportive system. If human resources methods were applied toward increasing employee morale and motivation, and being a liaison for support, then perhaps the goal of raising student achievement in schools would have a better chance of happening. A beginning point for this process might be the establishment of a formal human resources function in the school district, and an enlightened view of the need for excellent teacher support.

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