

# DEVELOPING THE FOCUS OF A HUMAN RESOURCES CATALYST

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## INTRODUCTION: BEING FOCUSED

BE	DO	HAVE
Insightful	Understand	Greater Empathy
Unattached	Surrender	Deeper Wisdom
<b>Focused</b>	<b>Hustle</b>	<b>Meaningful Progress</b>
Connected	Collaborate	Stronger Connection
Yourself	Believe	True Presence

Figure 1: Be, Do, Have Focus (McKirdy, 2019, p.61)

“When walking, walk. When eating, eat.”  
– Zen Proverb

Human resources (HR) by its very nature is a strategic leadership function. Yet, not all HR practitioners need to aspire to being strategic. We must all have an appreciation for and awareness of the bigger picture, as well as where and why HR does what it does. What we need to be careful of is that this strategic line-of-sight does not supersede or hinder HR’s primary focus of being of service to individual customers each and every day. Sometimes we fight this notion fearing it will dilute or dumb-down HR’s positioning. On the contrary, we should double-down on this. In other words, let us influence towards achieving business goals by doing some exceptional work with the people that matter. Essentially, we will have far greater impact as a result of how we go about our work in HR, rather than relying solely on technical nous and trying to constantly position ourselves as experts. That much is a given.

I call the practitioners who take this approach *HR Catalysts*. These are the people in Human Resources who spark and lead sustainable change in others across the business. This is who we want to be as a future-focused profession.

Pivotal to that success is the need for the HR Catalysts to be insightful of their brand of HR and the context in which they operate, and the requirement for them to be unattached to whatever may be holding them back from greater impact. These two dimensions of practice set up and clear the way for the third dimension we will discuss here – that of gaining **focus** in the work you are doing as a go-getting people practitioner.

Being focused is all about getting things done. It is the hustle of the HR world. It needs to happen quickly and, with regard to the HR Catalyst’s practice of the profession, it needs to result in meaningful progress. This cannot be fully achieved without first having greater empathy for your customer’s context (as we now know it) and having

surrendered potential shackles. Once we know what needs doing and have moved on from potential barriers, we are ideally placed to grab opportunities with both hands.

This dimension is like a rock-climbing technique. To climb efficiently, you need to put effort into your legs. It takes constant self-reminders to use the right technique here. It is all too easy to look at all the options above you, predominantly pull from handholds, and burnout your arms. You need to keep your mind on the best way to do things, not the most obvious. Continuing the rock-climbing analogy, mindset and state management are vital to a successful climb. It would be unfortunate to lose your nerve on a rock-face dozens of metres off the ground. Likewise, HR Catalysts must hold their nerve in the face of challenging themselves. This is less about putting on a brave face and more about setting yourself up for success by learning to manage your state of being in all manner of situations.

In any realm, focus requires persistence, as well as the need to form productive habits. In this chapter we will explore the need for the HR Catalyst to develop habits that reinforce the brand of HR you want to be known for, while amplifying your impact. In particular, this *Focused* dimension requires four distinct areas for the HR Catalyst:

1. Relentless forward progress
2. Leading and coaching
3. Influencing those who matter
4. Accountability

Persistence and tenacity are noble characteristics that have been held in high regard for centuries. They are also qualities of the HR Catalyst, but they do come with a proviso: stubbornness and an impulse to ‘flog a dead horse’ are not sensible (or sustainable) approaches for HR Catalysts to take to their work. Indeed, making relentless forward progress is more an outcome of the practitioner’s behaviour; not the behaviour itself. The savvy practitioner knows when to stop and take stock of a situation. If a process or project is clearly not gaining traction or making progress, there is no point forcing it. Instead, they know how to quickly assess the situation (be insightful) and decide on a new course of action (be unattached to the old process).

## THE ROLE OF HABITS IN FOCUS

Positive habits in your HR practice are vital to achieving a sense of progress. James Clear (2018) notes how small habits can have a surprisingly powerful impact on your life. He likens their impact to a pilot changing course just a couple of degrees. The nose of the plane would move only a couple of feet, with nobody on board noticing a thing, but over the course of a flight from one side of the United States to the other, the plane would be several hundred miles off course. We don’t notice these changes because their immediate impact is negligible, but the HR Catalyst looks to develop habits that have a significant return.

Such a habit might be based on incredible customer service, such as scheduling regular times to meet your client and checking-in to see what works best for them. You might ask, at an initial meeting, if it is ok to record the conversation on your phone so you can be fully present and not have to take notes. It is even better if you send the recording to the manager when you follow-up after the meeting, including having already completed some of the tasks you committed to.

To form habits that stick, it requires a process of first needing a cue, which triggers a response (when repeated becomes a routine), which in turn is followed by a reward. Clear (2018) explains how humans are motivated by the

anticipation of the reward rather than the reward itself. We cannot rely on some far-away future goal to keep us motivated in the present. Therefore, a secret to successfully implementing behaviours that drive progress forward, is to make the habit itself attractive.

When trying to build focus as a habit, we also need to be careful our efforts do not get derailed by people or processes. HR Catalysts are mindful that there will always be some level of interference. These can be characterised as either *Tensions*, *Triggers* or *Trolls*. It is worth understanding the difference between each, being prepared with some strategies to handle them, and understanding how a shift in your perspective can reduce the number of issues you come into contact with.

*Tensions* comprise the environment in which you work. It could be issues with the culture or the teams within which you are required to operate. I suspect you are well familiar with how these kind of external tensions feel! Not all of these negative environmental factors are widely known however; many are aspects of the internal environment that affect your ability to practice HR. Some of these tensions may be within yourself – judgements, preconceptions and assumptions you have made that are either unresolved or have recently been highlighted as unhelpful. In which case, you must seek to understand these better and surrender those that do not serve you.

It is important to recognise at this point that not all tension is negative. Focused HR Catalysts recognise that a level of tension is positive in motivating individuals to hustle and do better. Tension raises levels of alertness and awareness, and both are helpful in engaging robust debate. Just as in one extreme we come up against tension that cripples you with stress and indecision, without any tension at all we do not tend to be challenged or incentivised to improve things. It is simply about finding the balance and having the right amount of tension to keep you alert.

*Triggers* are the aspects of work that either set you up or set you off. Again, like tensions, they can be positive or negative towards your ability to make progress. Triggers reside within you – they are a mindset that has the ability to bolster your self-assurance or tear-down your self-confidence in a matter of words. HR Catalysts master their triggers by surrounding themselves with people and interactions that positively reinforce their values, while steering clear of those that are filled with toxic energy. Obviously negative situations cannot be avoided all the time – this is HR after all, and people behave badly, and it may be your role to deal with such people and scenarios. However, astute HR practitioners have a knack for depersonalising the toxic nature of work and treating work as a game.

Finally, *Trolls* are those people who bring you down – either intentionally or inadvertently. The internet is rife with ‘trolls’, and so too is the workplace if you let people get to you. Again, the HR Catalysts among us surround themselves whenever possible with people who build them up, rather than pull them down. However, a big part of dealing with ‘trolls’ is not giving them the chance to exist in the first place. You would be horrified at how many ‘difficult relationships’ are actually a result of our own misunderstandings, assumptions, and failure to communicate. An HR Catalyst does not make assumptions about a person, they find out what is going on and if they can help. Do this well, and you will find that the number of ‘trolls’ in your life is greatly reduced.

A response to *Tensions*, *Triggers* and *Trolls* in your working life is to practice the art of being ‘Anti-Fragile’, a concept coined by Taleb (2013). Pointing out the term ‘fragile’ has no opposite in the English language, Taleb wrote about the concept of ‘Anti-Fragility’ being things that gain from disorder. Traditionally, we consider the opposite of fragile to be strong and hardy, but such strength often means things are brittle. ‘Anti-Fragility’ means something that genuinely profits or benefits from chaos or stress.

This is a useful concept for HR Catalysts to consider. It is similar to the old expression *what doesn't kill you makes you stronger*. So, at this point, it is useful to ask yourself some more questions about your ability to progress forward:

- How are you practicing in an anti-fragile manner?

- What is your chaos? Is it real or perceived?
- What are your tensions, triggers and trolls at work?
- Describe your resilient characteristics and traits.
- How does your team handle tension, debate and disagreement?
- Unpack a project that has stalled – what are your two critical next moves?
- What is preventing you from gaining further traction in your HR practice?

## LEADING AND COACHING

A fundamental premise of the HR Catalyst is that human resources (and the wider people profession) is a key leadership role in any organisation. Those practicing HR should keep this as a practicing philosophy and use it to triage not only the work undertaken, but also the impact you strive to make.

Leadership is a service role and in the case of HR activity this is about creating environments for people to thrive, to be the best versions of themselves, and for the organisation to benefit as best it can from having its people engaged in meaningful work. Everything the HR function does must take the organisation closer to achieving its desired goals. Are we leading the organisation forward with the work we do? Did you lead the HR team in service of the organisation today? As a result of the work the HR team does, is the organisation in a better place today than it was this time last week? At times it can be hard to pinpoint immediate benefit from HR actions, as transformation takes time. It is not HR's role to do the leading for leaders; it is HR's role to enable leaders to lead.

It would be unfortunate to read the above paragraphs and think I am referring to HR leaders as only those in management roles within the profession. The type of leadership I am referring to is about people leaders, programme leaders and change leaders. Delegated authority is not vital for you to lead others, but HR in a sense has delegated that authority by its very nature. The expectation is that HR practitioners lead the better deployment of people and their experience of work. The most junior HR staff member can provide leadership of a process and advice to the most senior manager in the business – what matters is how you are behaving in that moment. How we go about our work of HR allows us to gain greater traction with customers and projects more than what it is we do.

HR Catalysts take the lead on key projects – there is definitely a need for fundamental project management skills in the HR Catalyst's portfolio of skills. Yet traditional project management has been very task and checklist oriented. The HR Catalyst leads projects by empowering others to shoulder the load and thus put new skills into practice. For sure, you will roll up your sleeves and get your hands dirty in the work that needs to be done, but the leadership approach of a HR Catalyst is one where others are empowered and enabled to stretch themselves. After all, you are likely to have multiple projects on the go.

But project leadership is not the extent of the work of the HR Catalyst, and it is here we might have to start developing new skills. Your core skill to develop is your ability to coach others, including leaders and staff at all levels. Coaching involves asking great questions. The best coaches do not provide many answers at all, but rather are great conversationalists who ask the type of questions to elicit a train of thought which sees the person being coached come up with their own answers. Questions that make your customers think about the impact of their actions, the potential for success and what that looks like for their staff, and questions that require managers to imagine alternative scenarios and see their people in a different reality are gold for HR Catalysts to gain greater traction.

The beauty of the HR Catalyst as a coach is that you do not need to be an expert in the topic you are coaching

a customer through. (This is different from a mentoring relationship which is one where the mentor has 'been-there-and-done-that'. This is not the case with coaching). You simply need to be an expert at asking great questions that make people think. The only way to get better at coaching is to ask more questions! The deeper you go, the more effective you are, but be careful – it is a fine line and many go too far. This is why HR Catalysts also use their emotional intelligence and self-awareness to great effect.

Coaching effectively takes a good deal of rapport and a solid relationship, so consider the following questions:

- Why is HR primarily a leadership function?
- How can HR amplify its leadership role in your organisation?
- How are you leading HR practice in your organisation?
- What is different about your HR leadership? How do you know it is effective?
- Do you use coaching as a key tool to spark change in others? How?
- Is this part of your HR brand? How would others around you describe you?

## INFLUENCING THOSE WHO MATTER

HR Catalysts operate on the premise that they get work done **through** people; not by doing more themselves. To be fair, the HR Catalysts I know and have trained are incredibly hard working and diligent. They are also smart, savvy workers who use the people around them to get things done – they influence those who matter.

First, they have the credibility to influence, which comes from how well others can relate to you. I call this your *Relatability Quotient* (RQ) – it is the measure of how well others can relate to you, plus your ability to make good use of that level of relatability.

Your RQ will get you a long way in your HR career. You will no doubt be aware that organisations are often run by personalities. Some people climb the ladder, while others (perhaps equally as deserving) do not. It is about who you know and who knows you. Note that it is also understandable if, while reading that last point, you recoil and think to yourself "It's HR's role to ensure proper process is followed so this doesn't happen!" Well, yes and no – certainly it is HR's role to champion fairness, but HR Catalysts are under no delusions that a few strong personalities will have influence that outstrips their formal authority. The key takeaway for you here is that it is your role to figure out ways to (a) get on their radar, and (b) influence these people to achieve better outcomes for the organisation – that is get done what you need done. This may mean they take the credit. Let that go.

Second, you need to know who matters. The people to whom you need to relate, to influence at a higher, more effective level, and who you can work with and through to make things happen, are pivotal in creating opportunities you can really invest yourself in and get some great work done. A desire to have a great experience at work as an HR Catalyst does not need to detract from your ability to provide world-class customer service and deliver unbelievable results. So, to create a list of influencers in your organisation and what you know about them – their skills, interests, experiences and aspirations – and tag these alongside projects and initiatives you plan to undertake in the coming months, would be a great move. Again, effectiveness here comes down to the relationship you develop with key individuals and spending meaningful time with them.

Your RQ, and knowing who matters across your organisation, are important things for you to think about, so consider the following questions:

- What is your Relatability Quotient?
- Who matters in your HR practice? Why? Why them?
- How and where could you generate a little more friction in your practice?
- How could you do this in your team and your organisation?
- How easy are you to work with? What do your key customers say?

## ACCOUNTABILITY

At this point we are about halfway through the Catalyst HR model, and it may seem odd that accountability only now gets a mention. It is a critical characteristic of operating as a person who sparks change in others across your organisation. It is also something that HR as a profession is not necessarily known for, despite a focus on ensuring *others* are held accountable through performance management frameworks. Yet, we needed to lay the foundations of being *insightful* and *unattached*, or else we would have been holding ourselves accountable to an unattainable and unfiltered amount of work.

Being accountable as an HR Catalyst requires three fundamental opportunities you must take (or create) for yourself:

1. Standing up
2. Stepping in
3. Standing out

*Standing up* is about exactly that; taking a stand for something. It is about having an opinion and standing by it. This is the first move of HR accountability. It is not about disagreeing for the sake of having your voice heard, but it is about putting your hand-up and being counted. Too many HR practitioners are caught up in pleasing people and saying "yes" to everything, then they wonder why they are not invited to the table. Even if your opinion rubs some people up the wrong way, you are better to have had your say than to shrink into the background and remain silent.

You will need to pick your moments, but if they do not arise then you will need to create moments that serve your purpose by *Stepping in*. HR Catalysts who step into situations, problems, projects and situations (particularly ones that others shy-away from), create moments and opportunities to not only make a real difference, but to change the brand of HR in organisations and even industries. There is a knack to identifying situations that will allow you to leverage your skills versus ones that will see you sink. You need to be able to read the situation well enough to pick your moment, but not dwell too long so that the moment passes. That's called procrastinating into inaction! Stepping in to tricky situations takes courage, but you can receive a huge payback for your efforts. It is in these situations that you stand out from the pack.

HR as a profession is not one known for *Standing out* from the crowd. It has for decades been known merely as the place that gives out hugs and comes down hard on behaviour that discriminates. It is ironic that HR is also widely known as having a "Do as we say, not as we do" attitude. As a profession, HR often stands out for all the wrong

reasons, not least because you can easily find the following examples of HR acting contrary to the best practice it preaches:

- HR advising working around issues rather than addressing what's pressing
- HR getting involved in office politics and seeming more concerned with hierarchy
- HR (rightly or wrongly) failing to be transparent with process and progress
- HR people ironically having trouble seeing the human side of issues
- HR being subjective, rather than objective, and taking sides.

So, the time is ripe for the HR Catalysts among us to take a stand for making change in our organisations as well as in how HR is practiced. To stand up for a challenge and a position that may not be popular can be one of the hardest steps to take in your career, but it can also be the most rewarding.

Have you been standing up, stepping in and standing out in your HR practice? Ask yourselves these questions to take a benchmark of where you are now:

- What does 'standing up', 'stepping in' and 'standing out' look like in your HR practice?
- What would each of these fundamental opportunities look like for you?
- Where in your work could you take on a little more pressure?
- Where in your team could you create and/or apply a little more pressure?
- How do people you work with describe your ability to get stuff done?
- How does your HR practice challenge the status quo?

## HR CATALYSTS DON'T WAIT FOR CHANGE TO HAPPEN

Many futurists believe change is not happening faster; we are just reacting slower to the changes around us as the amount of change increases; that the change we see today was set in play a decade ago. Essentially, what we experience now was largely determined in our past. So, what does this mean for the practice of HR? What will be the impact of traditional job disintegration be on HR? The Catalysts among us aren't waiting – they are already creating their future.

It is widely accepted that whole jobs are unlikely to be replaced by robotics and artificial intelligence. Instead, large components of roles will be automated, requiring a partial 'plugging of gaps' required across organisations. The same will occur in HR. Have you thought about where? Have you thought about how you can leverage this coming change, instead of being waylaid by it?

## THE ADAPTIVE HR PROFESSIONAL – GAINING TRACTION IN CHANGE

For decades, the Human Resources profession has constantly rebuilt itself on the foundations of the drive for greater employee productivity subject to the industrial imperatives of the day. Over the past 20 years, HR has moved from an enforcer of rules and policy, through a transition from staff satisfaction, to engagement. Now, with a global move away from traditional, full-time employment as the predominant workforce model, the relationship between employee and employer is morphing again. So much so that today the tenets of 'loyalty' and 'engagement' are fading in significance and HR is turning towards the next big thing. Indeed, many believe we have landed on it – it is known as the *employee experience*.

The thing is, whether employee experience is or isn't the next step-change in HR thinking does not matter: What is important is that HR continues to evolve. It is the role of the HR Catalysts to steer this evolution and gain traction with and through change. We cannot avoid change – indeed, this is how the HR profession has remained relevant. The HR Catalyst is at the forefront of the next evolution of the people profession as these practitioners are not only technically savvy, but drive change through how they practice.

**Callum McKirdy** has 18+ years' experience in human resources roles, beginning in Wellington's core Public Service, consulting roles in the private sector and a senior management role in a large social services provider. He returned to business consulting – his passion – developing people and teams via group facilitation, speaking, and mentoring. He provides valuable insights into the inner workings of organisations, the politics, competing demands and people dynamics.

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