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The future of HR is being BRAVE

Wendy Silver

Abstract

Purpose – *Organizations will need HR departments that take bold new approaches if they are to weather the uncertainty and changes on the horizon. This paper aims to discuss what makes an organization or a leader BRAVE, and examples of HR professionals and organizations leading the way are provided to help readers bravely shape their own organizations.*

Design/methodology/approach – *This paper draws upon various real-life examples of organizations whose HR departments are leading the way.*

Findings – *Organizations need BRAVE HR professionals and leaders to create, implement and communicate key initiatives to ensure companies make decisions that support workplace cultures that people choose to join and remain a part of.*

Originality/value – *No amount of technology can replace the forward-thinking thought, communication and action that being BRAVE requires. This paper will help HR professionals gain a braver perspective.*

Keywords *Human resource management, Ethics, Benefits, Coaching, Leadership, Capabilities*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

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A recent headline declared: "Managing HR is about to become easier." Given that my perspective is the complete opposite, I had to read it. It discussed all the ways AI makes and will continue to make HR work easier, particularly with respect to recruiting and hiring. It even cited new technologies and algorithms companies would be able to use to reduce turnover and to determine future pay.

On the one hand, this is good stuff. HR professionals will be freed from mundane and routine tasks that often take time to complete. AI could also eliminate certain unconscious biases in the hiring process and in determining promotional opportunities – assuming, of course, we have the right algorithms in place. But even the newest and best technology will never be able to take into account all the external factors going on all around us, and how that impacts people in the workplace.

Consider our current political landscape. Regardless of personal political beliefs or opinions, I think most would agree we are living through some interesting times. Government regulation may no longer require certain actions by employers. Companies will have to decide for themselves how they want to handle important issues such as leave policies, equal pay, diversity, work-life balance and bullying in the workplace.

The #metoo movement was a clear indicator we may not have come as far as we thought in terms of gender equality. We know there is still lots of work to be done to ensure policies are not only in place, but actually work towards achieving their stated outcome.

We also have the millennial generation, who now make up a majority of the workforce. Their desire to have a purpose and impact is vital to their engagement. Workplace flexibility is also at the top of their list when considering specific employers (Bibby and Rozier, 2017). (By the way, they are not alone in that respect as I discuss in more detail later.)

We also know that pay is no longer a predictor of workplace satisfaction. According to data obtained and reviewed by Glassdoor (Chamberlain, 2017), the top predictor of workplace

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satisfaction is the culture and values of an organization. This is followed closely by the quality of senior leadership and career opportunities. All of this is tied to a company's bottom line (Cameron, 2015).

The current climate and expectation of those in the workforce are forcing companies to reexamine not only their policies and processes but also their core values and beliefs. Policies, practices and processes that are compliant are no longer enough. They must also be effective and reflective of a company's values and mission.

Even the best technology in the world cannot provide these deliverables. We need BRAVE HR professionals and leaders to create, implement and communicate these key initiatives to ensure companies make decisions that support workplace cultures that people choose to join and remain a part of.

In this article, I will describe what I think makes an organization or a leader *BRAVE* (notice the acronym below) and give you some of my favorite examples of those leading the way.

BRAVE means being BOLD

Taken right out of the dictionary, "bold" is defined as "Daring and courageous. Not fearing rebuff." Fear is a powerful thing. It can make us do things we might not otherwise do, and it can make us NOT do the things we should be doing. We all have fears of some kind or another. How we deal with them is what is most important.

Companies and businesses are no different. Organizational fears often stem from the fears of its leaders and can permeate the company culture. This could be a fear of implementing a new policy that sounds good on paper but the implementation has an unknown outcome. Or it could be avoiding a difficult issue because how you deal with it, or what you say, may come with some risk.

For example, we know how important flexibility and specifically remote working have become to attracting and retaining the best talent. According Gallop's 2017 State of the American Workplace, employees are demanding more autonomy and control over their working lives. More than half of those employees surveyed said that a role that provides greater work-life balance is "very important," and that they would change jobs for one that offered them flexi-time.

Even more compelling for employers, there is significant data to suggest flexibility and remote increases productivity and reduces costs and turnover:

A Nationwide 2016 survey by Sure Payroll, a Web-based payroll provider for small businesses, found 86 per cent of those surveyed (2,060 professionals) indicated they were more productive when allowed to work remotely. Two-thirds of the managers surveyed indicated that their remote workers were more productive. Similarly, ConnectSolutions (now CoSo Cloud) found of 39 per cent who work remotely at least a few times per month, 77 per cent report greater productivity while working offsite with 30 per cent accomplishing more in less time and 24 per cent accomplishing more in the same amount of time. In total, 23 per cent are even willing to work longer hours than they normally would onsite to accomplish more, while 52 per cent are less likely to take time off when working remotely – even when sick.

Aetna and American Express have both saved millions in office space by allowing employees to work remotely. Moreover, according to a Stanford University report, job attrition rates fell by over 50 per cent as a result of telecommuting (Loubier, 2017).

I would also argue, based on my own experience and research, that flex policies and remote working are key to keeping women, who still bear the brunt of household responsibilities, in leadership positions.

Yet, despite the data, many companies remain afraid to make flexi-time an acceptable and *regular* practice, fearing that if they let one person do it, everyone will want to do it. In my experience, that does not usually happen. Not everyone wants to work from home. But let us face it, everyone has a life outside of work, and chances are most if not all employees will need some level of flexibility at some point or another during the course of their career, whether it be to care for a child, a sick parent or a disabled spouse. Or maybe, just because it will make things easier for them in some way or another.

A manager at Kronos was faced with this exact issue. He was approached by one of his valued employees. She asked him if she could work completely remotely for nine months so she could tour with her daughter for an acting gig. The manager's response did not focus on "if," it would work, but rather "how" to make it work. Instead of shutting the idea down out of fear (so many things could go wrong!), he trusted his employee and together they established practices and methods that enabled such a situation to work (2017).

BOLD companies and leaders take *smart risk* to push past their fears. A smart risk is one that involves a thoughtful decision-making process that leaves you feeling good and confident in the decision, while also minimizing risk and liability, even if it IS a bit risky.

Consider the companies who have taken to social media to express their views on such topics as immigration and gun control. These statements do not come without risk and sometimes repercussions. BOLD is willing to communicate opinions and feelings on controversial topics, despite this risk, because supporting an issue or cause that impacts employees, customers and/or the community sends a very strong and powerful message about values and commitment to those values.

BRAVE companies RECOGNIZE their weaknesses and RESOLVE to improve them. The data we solicit and pull from various resources are only valuable if we are able to analyze it effectively. Successful HR leaders need to be able to not only identify trends but also be able to problem solve when they see data going in the wrong direction. Even beyond that, data will never tell the whole story. We need leaders who are willing to take the time to ask and listen to their workforce in an effort to understand what they could be doing better and where they can improve.

I recently read an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* written by a female restaurant owner of a mac and cheese restaurant (Wade, 2018). (I know [. . .] we already love her.) She learned that certain customers regularly harassed some of her employees. Equally concerning: her managers, who were male, ignored the reports of the incidents – not

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because they did not care but because when viewed through their eyes, the situations did not seem that serious or threatening.

The steps the restaurant owner took to address the problem were key to actually solving this problem. First, she was open to accepting the fact she had a problem. Second, she had a meeting where she listened to her employee's stories. Third, they "convened for a problem-solving session" where they were able to create an effective and very creative color-coded system, where different types of customer behavior were categorized such that they could deal with the issues in real time. This is exactly the kind of problem-solving approach used by BRAVE organizations.

This can be particularly hard to do as in-house HR leaders. You often get so entrenched in the day-to-day requirements of enforcing policies and practices; you fail to recognize what you could be doing things differently, and better. This happened to me.

Several years ago, a benefits administrator came to me for guidance. She had just received a call from a manager who had been approached by an employee who had just suffered a miscarriage and wanted to know if she could use Bereavement Leave to take a few days off. My response was quick, reactive and sterile. "No. Miscarriages don't qualify for bereavement leave, our policy is very specific as to what situations are covered." I advised the benefits administrator to see what other leave we could provide and to ensure the employee received time off if she needed it, but Bereavement Leave did not apply. I could tell the Benefits Administrator was not thrilled with my reply, and at the time I had no idea why.

It was not until several months later, while reading an article about working through pregnancy loss that it hit me. My response was so NOT brave. I had not taken the time to listen, ask questions from either the employee or the benefits manager as to why they thought Bereavement Leave should apply, or to evaluate if our policy was still what we wanted it to be.

I do not know that my answer was wrong, but I know I did not take the time to do the work to make sure I was getting it right. While I am obviously not proud of how I handled it, it was a good lesson, and one that now makes me a much more effective advisor. Until we are open to recognizing our weaknesses and mistakes, our ability to be better is limited.

BRAVE organizations are willing to be ALTERNATIVE

They challenge traditional norms both within their company, and even within our society. Just because things have always been a certain way definitely does not make them right. Now more than ever it's important to look at all aspects of our workplace culture through a new lens and get creative to make lasting, impactful and effective change […] even if different.

Companies are starting to get creative when it comes to attracting and retaining talent. For example, Boxed got a lot of attention for their decision to cover the college tuition for employee's children who were headed to college. Other organizations have offered to help employees pay for student loans. Stripe, an online payment company based in Ireland, has gotten really creative in their hiring practices. They have invited entire groups to apply for

work, as opposed to just individuals. Their goal is not only to hire great people and teams but also to try to tap into undervalued and underrepresented talent in effort to diversify their workforce. While their results are still pending, you have to give them credit for being different and thinking outside the box.

One of my favorite examples of alternative work practices is from Tower, a company that makes stand-up paddleboards. In an effort to improve employees' quality of life they moved to a 5-h workday. Their results were widely successful. In addition to improved employee satisfaction, productivity and revenue went up (Aarstol, 2016).

What I love about some of these examples is that companies do not have to have a ton of funds to find ways be make change. Flexibility and alternative approaches can be as simple as providing employees their schedule two weeks advance instead of one. Anything that makes life easier or better for employees becomes a win-win because when a company invests in employee success, the employee invests in the company's success.

Brave companies VOICE THEIR VALUES AND VALUE THEIR VOICE to make real change

I encourage all new companies regardless of size to spend some time identifying their values; by that I mean personally and as an organization. Our values guide our actions and decisions and it is almost impossible to feel confident making big, often high-risk decisions, without having a set of values to guide you. Our values are what set our priorities and what ensure we are doing the right thing at different points in time. If we use our values to guide our decision-making, it is hard to go wrong.

But it is not enough to simply identify your values, BRAVE organizations actually communicate them and live by them. Voicing their values is a way to hold them accountable. It is also a way for companies and leaders to create change within our society, leading by example.

Starbucks is a great example. They recently announced that after years of work, they have achieved 100 per cent pay equity for partners of gender and race performing similar work across the country. It is one thing to say you value equality and fairness. It is quite another to actually do the hard work to make it happen. Kimberly Churches, Chief Executive Officer of the American Association of University Women said it best:

> A lot of companies espouse values like fairness and pay equity, but those values end up framed on a wall and not always put into practice […] Starbucks is not only talking the talk but walking the walk, and that sets an example – not only for the retail industry, but for all employers, nationally and globally. (Anon, 2018)

What I love even more about what Starbucks is doing: they are publically sharing the tools and best practices they used to reach their goal, in the hope that other employers will join in working toward pay equity. Talk about making real change!.

> "**At heart of all this, at the core of being BRAVE, is communication and transparency, and being open and honest with employees.**"

BRAVE organizations put ETHICS ABOVE EFFICIENCIES

The minute we sacrifice our ethics and values for more superficial benefits, we immediately limit our success. Maybe this is not the kind of success your profit margins would initially suggest (though I think we have all seen in some form or another the PR and financial costs of not doing the right thing), but rather our success as people with whom others want to work with.

Several years ago, I was overseeing an employee relations issue and investigation. It had come to our attention that one of our managers had used the n-word in a staff meeting. While the word was not directed at anyone specific, it was used in reference to some customers in a "joking" context.

When it came time to determine how to handle the matter, it came down to two choices: fire the manager or give a strong reprimand warning of termination for future misconduct. Senior management was initially split on how to respond. Some of the business leaders were obviously and appropriately worried about what it would mean to the business to lose this manager, who was an otherwise star employee. They had goals and deliverables they needed to meet. Letting this manager go would put the business in a difficult spot.

However, as we talked through the matter, it became clear. Ethically, we could not condone the behavior or the comment. The concerns for the work environment and the employees in the department needed to take precedence over the operational concerns. It was concluded that in the long run, it was better for the business to find a leader who could be trusted to uphold the values of the organization. In turn, we had to do the same and let the employee go. These kinds of decisions are never easy but they are key to business success. If customers and employees do not trust you to do the right thing, they will not invest in you. It is also key to being able to sleep at night and a great example of a smart risk.

At heart of all this, at the core of being BRAVE, is communication and transparency, and being open and honest with employees. Effective communication is what creates trust, respect, value and accountability, all of which are necessary to have a successful employment relationship and business. Companies who do this well may find they already exhibit many of these BRAVE principles in their workplace.

This is definitely not easy work and HR cannot do it alone. The leaders within an organization must be willing to partner with HR to initiate change, challenge the status quo, face their fears and dare to be different. No amount of technology can replace the forward-thinking thought, communication and action that being BRAVE requires.

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