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Scott Norton  
*Arizona State University,*

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## Commentary

# The Human Resources Function in Education: 2010

Scott Norton

*"The new focus in administration is to be the human element. The new center of attention and solicitude is the individual person, the worker. And this change comes about fundamentally for no sentimental reasons, but because the enlistment of human cooperation, of the interest and goodwill of the workers, has become the crux of the production problem."* (Tead & Metcalf, 1920, p. 1).

The foregoing statement was asserted by Tead and Metcalf over 80 years ago in their text, *Personnel Administration*, one of the very first completed works in the field of personnel administration. Although the text was directed primarily to managers in business and industry, its intent to define the science and art of industrial administration ultimately influenced practices in educational administration as well. Tead and Metcalf's concepts of the role of personnel administration were amazingly insightful for this early time in the history of human resources (HR) management. Their vision that the personnel function belonged in the center of planning and production operations in all organizations was revolutionary: "The personnel executive should be on a parity with the production executive; and both should in turn be members of the executive or operating committee of the company" (Tead & Metcalf, 1920, p. 3). Keep in mind that these perspectives were expounded when the scientific management concepts of Frederick Taylor and others were still prominent. The challenges by Mary Parker Follett and others to Taylor's task system, and its strictly controlled work conditions, were still ahead. Tead and Metcalf were well aware that "this view is, of course, at odds with the conception of the 'employment manager' who has no policy-determining power, no major executive influence and authority; who is in reality no more than a hiring agent" (p. 3).

Although the personnel function in education has greatly expanded beyond the processes of recruitment, selection, assignment and dismissal, today it continues to serve primarily in a support and maintenance role. Although positive views of the importance of the human dimension in organizations have broadened over the years, the people dimension in organizations is now being viewed as the without-which-not of organizational success. As Rana (2000) has succinctly stated, "With so many companies referring to staff as their greatest asset, never before in the history of work have people been so relevant to the bottom line" (p.16). New directions in people

management in this decade will not only view the human component as the greatest asset for the successful attainment of organizational goals, but the truism that "schools are people" will be the center of the system's thinking when planning and adopting guiding policy and determining goals and school procedures.

The acceptance of the belief in the importance of the human element in all organizations position the human resources function in its most relevant and exciting role to date; and this fact changes the human resources function to one of system leadership. This new leadership role requires new thinking about: (1) the qualifications needed by persons in roles of human resources administration; (2) the redesigning of preparation programs in higher education for those individuals who will serve in these leadership positions; (3) the importance of gaining an expanded understanding and use of technology in the administration of the human resources processes; (4) the implementation of programs of continuous professional growth on the part of HR leaders; and (5) the need to gain a fuller understanding of the mission and operations of the school system as a whole. Two major changes in the role of the HR function will be witnessed during the remaining years of this decade: (1) change from a support and maintenance function to a key leadership role in the total operations of the school system; and (2) change from the traditional focus of administering the basic processes of the HR function to a broader and more strategic focus of people management whereby the employee becomes the center of attention and concern (Webb & Norton, 2003).

### **The Strategic Role of the Human Resources Function**

A brief look at strategic planning may serve to illustrate the inextricable relationship of the school system and its human resources dimension. "Strategic planning is the means by which an organization constantly recreates itself to achieve extraordinary purposes...and have the prerogative...for providing the vision, values and leadership that control, guide, and sustain" (Norton, Webb, Dlugosh, & Sybouts, 1996, p. 132). Rather than merely serving as a support system for school system operations, human resources administration will have a "seat at the table" as part of top management and will serve as a partner in the determination of system goals. This relationship is based on research findings that organizational progress is directly tied to the system's human component — the goals, attitudes, commitments and satisfactions of people. System goals will have to be the first consideration of the human resources function during the remainder of this decade, and for each goal there will be an accompanying, planned and integrated strategy set forth by the human resources function throughout the system that facilitates its achievement. Tyler (2001) notes that, "An HR plan describes what HR must do to help the company achieve the goals outlined in the business plan. An HR plan lists the action steps or milestones for meeting those goals, as well as target dates for completion and specific guidelines for measuring performance" (p. 95). As stated by Ulrich (2000), "To be full fledged strategic partners with senior management...HR executives should impel and guide serious discussion on how the company should be organized to carry out its strategy" (p. 24). A program change or the initiation of a new school program will be accompanied by an integrated strategy of the human resources function. This perspective makes HR processes such as recruitment and selection of personnel more compelling than merely filling jobs with persons meeting the qualifications for various position openings. Strategic staffing requires that every effort be made

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**Scott Norton is Professor, Arizona State University, Tempe, AZ.**

to match individuals with specific short- and long-term job needs. Purposeful thought is given to “good fit” whereby persons with the specific talents for the position at hand are recruited with the school system’s immediate and future needs in mind as well as the applicant’s career and professional growth aspirations. In many ways, this concept is revolutionary. It places the employee’s interests and aspirations on the front burner; thus bonding with the school district is enhanced and employee retention is fostered. Can the individual’s career goals and professional growth interests be met in the school district over time and does the applicant truly want to become a member of the system and for the right reasons? If a mismatch is hired, the employee will not be able to form a bond with the school district and the commitment needed for achieving successful outcomes is unlikely to materialize. This perspective, however, cannot overlook the fact that in education, like business and industry, the customer is “king.” Conger (1997) states it clearly, “When the customer comes first...., something has to adjust in the company culture. Customers care nothing for our management structure, our strategic plan, or our financial structure. They are interested in only one thing: results, the value we can deliver” (p. 27). When the students and parents in education express their specific needs, the personnel needs of the school system become less important than those of the stakeholders being served. Paraphrasing the thoughts of Conger, the school system must offer the opportunity for teachers and other staff personnel to achieve their personal and professional goals, but, in turn, school personnel must work to assure that the needs of the stakeholders are being served.

How will the present organizational arrangements of school districts and the busy world of the HR administrator permit attention to these growing leadership demands? Part of the answer rests in giving needed attention to the administration of the HR processes at the local school level. Studies by Norton (2000) reveal that the selection, assignment, induction and evaluation of school personnel have become much more than a shared responsibility of the school and the central personnel unit; studies indicate that these processes are increasingly being administered by local school administrators, and although the HR function has always been a shared function, this decade will witness the placement of personnel specialists at local school sites who are prepared to coordinate HR activities. In addition, technological developments will revolutionize the automation of the HR processes and enable many tasks to be completed more efficiently and effectively and at less cost. This result will allow the HR administrator to give needed attention to other matters such as HR strategy questions and best ways to gain required knowledge and skills to meet immediate and long-range needs. As noted by Kemske (2000), “Leading change will become the HR’s greatest contribution to the corporation” (p. 39).

### **New Competencies Required**

The new leadership role for human resources will require new competencies on the part of all HR administrators and will demand a higher level of knowledge about the school system and its community. All of this means that the HR function increasingly will be more effective. Specifically, the new HR leadership role will demand:

- A variety of leadership styles and human resources competencies to deal with a diversified array of workers and work teams.

- A comprehensive knowledge of the the total operations of school organization and the school community in which it is embedded.

- The skills and knowledge to employ human resources strategy in relation to the strategic goals of the overall system.

- The capacity to employ the necessary human resources technologies to the HR strategies and the ability to apply those strategies more quickly and effectively to rapidly changing conditions at less cost to the school system.

- A broader and more concentrated preparation for positions in HR administration including specific instruction in organizational policy analysis and policy development; policy and school law; strategic planning; organizational development and people management; human motivation; and educational applications of technology.

### **The Broader Focus of People Management**

Changes in the make-up of the workforce itself, along with general attitudes of workers about life and work, will necessitate new attention to the management of people. Successful schools will demonstrate the belief that the human component is indeed the school’s greatest asset. These schools will implement policies and procedures that serve to make the school a place where professional and support personnel want to work. The career and life interests of the employee will be priorities of paramount importance. Work schedules will be reconfigured so that teaching assignments and incentives will stem from both the school system’s needs and the talents and the interests of the professional teacher. Competition for talent will require greater attention to the deployment of personnel; placement in roles that allow for the maximization of talents and personal interests. Flexible schedules and other approaches to work assignments will include the work and life balances required by the teacher; not all teaching personnel will be assigned to a full day of teaching. Flexible work contracts with more time off and variations in the number of hours worked, optimal use of workers’ special knowledge and skills, and more use of virtual technologies will be common practices. Many employees will assume part-time teaching positions that suit their family life needs. Neither the school program nor the student will suffer from these developments; rather many will benefit by having a highly qualified, committed teacher even though that teacher may not be employed fulltime. Studies on the topic of part-time workers are changing some older myths about the practice. In one study (*Arizona Republic*, September 10, 2000, Catalyst), for example, part-time women employees remained with their employers for many years; many were promoted during the time they were employed part-time; most were satisfied with the flexible work schedules; and indeed half of the women in the study did return to fulltime employment after their part-time work experiences. Distance education technologies and other virtual means of educational instructional delivery will permit talented teachers to reach many students during a more abbreviated work schedule. Although some persons contend that education is different and therefore flexible scheduling won’t work in that field, the facts are that this arrangement has already found its way into educational practices. As underscored by an article in *HR Focus* (March, 2001), one of the strongest economic arguments for the utilization of virtual technologies is its power to attract and retain good employees.

Current demographic trends will have profound effects on the HR function with their many implications in the area of people management. U.S. population forecasts call for a continual increase in the graying of America; 28% of the population will be 45 to 65 years of age by the 2010. Furthermore, data indicate that 18.4 million were in the under age 5 category in 1990 and only 17.6 million in the year 2000, amounting to a decrease of 4.3% in only a ten-year time period. Although the percentage of young people in America will continue to decrease, this population will have more education than their parents and grandparents. Thus, schools will be working with a more educated citizenry that will place new demands on schools regarding the quality of school programs for their children. Concerns for highly qualified personnel in the schools will continue.

The workforce also will be reflective of the fact that race in America is quite rapidly turning upside down; by mid-century there will be more minorities and a minority of whites living in the country. By 2010, the white population will account for only 9% of the world's population making them the earth's smallest ethnic minority (Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2000). Labor statistics reveal that one-third of the nation's workforce already is minority and women constitute 63% of the American workforce. Women with young children are entering the world of work at an unprecedented rate. Today an estimated 75% of the male workforce has working wives. The bottom line seems quite clear, HR administrators must have the ability to work with a highly diversified workforce and with diverse cultures that hold differing attitudes toward work and family life. Differences in work ethics, organizational loyalty, personal beliefs and values, and perspectives relative to personal motivation have become considerations of paramount importance for HR leaders.

### **Work and Worklife Balances**

HR administration is committed to the administration of the human resources of the school system. This concept compels us to recognize the importance of the personal and family life of employees. Balancing the demands of work and the need to deal with family issues have become topics of primary importance. American workers today are increasingly trying to balance their family life with their workplace responsibilities. Just think about this matter for a moment; what types of balancing acts are employees trying to maintain in school systems today? The working husband and wife, for example, are attempting to perform effectively on their jobs while maintaining the responsibilities of home and family. Children and their schooling are important matters of concern. In many instances, parental care presents personal responsibilities for them as well. Just finding the time to care for family matters and related financial obligations is problematic for many persons. Effective performance in teaching requires a continuous program of professional development, including the securing of higher levels of certification and/or degree program completions. The popular saying today, and the trending point of view, is that today's worker is changing from the perspective of "living to work" to that of "working to live." If the employee does not find the school working conditions that suit his or her life needs, they most likely will look elsewhere.

### **Summary**

The needs of the schools' clientele and the demands of changes described in this article will require HR administrators to be much more aware of best practices as demonstrated by action research activities and the monitoring of program results. Such perspectives will require

school leaders to be less concerned with routine administrative tasks and more involved in the strategic operations of the school and school system relative to: (1) the alignment of HR practices with those of the total school system; (2) the improvement of communication among and between all employees on matters that depend on the knowledge and collaboration of workers in different units; and (3) the status of worker assignments and attitudes in the workplace, such as workplace conditions and supervisor relationships with employees, that are enhancing or inhibiting the achievement of school-wide goals.

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