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Human Resources – A Conversation with Dad

From the *Overview of the Four-Frame Model* (Bolman & Deal, 2008, p. 18)

	Structural	Human Resource	Political	Symbolic
Metaphor for organization		<i>Family</i>		
Central concepts		<i>Needs, skills, relationships</i>		
Image of leadership		<i>Empowerment</i>		
Basic leadership challenge		<i>Align organizational and human needs</i>		

I had an interesting conversation with my father today. Dad is a retired “enlisted banker”; that is to say, he is the product of the old “management trainee” school of management in the banking industry (as compared to having been born into money). Dad began his 37-year career¹ as a *functional* trainee, hired in 1955 without a college degree, but with/for the contractually expressed purpose to fill an eventual management position at the *Casco Bank and Trust Company*.² Dad retired as a vice president in the commercial loan department; he had spent about a third of his career as manager of a variety of branch offices, and about a quarter of his tenure as the bank’s personnel manager and trainer in the 1960s. Dad left the bank as a result of its “purchase” by the Bank of Boston, c.1990.

Interestingly, the conversation began as a discussion about life-long learners. Dad is currently a trustee for a USM program for older students (OLLI³) and has become fascinated with the statistics associated with the students’ collective and individual years of formal education. As we talked about the prototypical elder college student, we both started drawing comparisons with the learning styles of past and present colleagues, eventually landing in the middle of a discussion specifically about company training programs; we, of course, had to concede the apparent total lack of training programs in today’s business world. As we talked, it became very obvious [to me] that my father learned how to be a manager when the HR style was popular. In the context of this topic, it was easy to reach the conclusion that ineffective use of and/or no HR “presence” is “what’s wrong with the business world today.”

Rather than try to “tease out” inferences from Dad’s comments about the banking industry and its management practices, I’m going to go straight down the cues in the “four-frame model”, using his words as examples – although, not necessarily in order of presentation. I will also compare the older trainee model with the model currently in place when it seems relevant.

The *central concepts* of the HR style - *needs, skills, and relationships* – were addressed in the old management trainee program very specifically and rationally. Simply: in order to be a banker, the employee must learn banking, and the employee must learn *how to be* a banker. The traditional model walked the new potential manager through all phases of banking; a few examples are: teller, transit, new accounts, trust, installment & commercial loan, etc.. Before becoming a manager, the employee learned the technical and logistical relationships inherent to banking beginning with an organizationally entry-level positioning. The premise behind this sampling is that the eventual manager has actually experienced the work that s/he will eventually supervise before being given the responsibility. The current management trainee model seems to skip the “supervised” phase, recruiting college graduates to entry level *management positions*. At the point of hire, the new employees are trained in protocol, policy, and tasking for the purpose of supervising positions that are organizationally below the manager (CSX Corporation, Inc., 2005).

¹ Dad worked only for one bank throughout his entire career.

² It is relevant to acknowledge that Casco Bank belong to the *commercial bank* industry category, born in Portland, ME, 1933. See <http://www.fundinguniverse.com/company-histories/Casco-Northern-Bank-Company-History.html> for relatively detailed history.

³ Osher Lifelong Learning Institute - This site is a University of Southern Maine program for older adults to attend college classes. <http://www.usm.maine.edu/eap/seniorcollege/>

An added benefit to the “sampling” method in the older model is that the eventual managers became aware of training “holes”; they were able to identify need areas by virtue of having first gone through in-place training, and then moving into positions in which they could implement additional procedures.

Aligning organizational and human needs is a positive default of the older trainee program in that adeptness (human need) is easily identified as the employee works through the process. For example, a trainee who can easily grasp the concept of clearing checks through the transit department, but also seems to want to read every character on the face of every check will not make a very efficient transit manager – but s/he may make a particularly adept systems manager, responsible for streamlining processing in general. The new trainee model presumes that management is the task, and essentially ignores the task(s) of the supervisee. The common sense of positioning adept personnel is implied – it’s just plain good business to place a employees in positions in which they will excel (Taylor, 1911).

The net result of the older trainee model was the creation of an employee who felt *empowered* to perform his or her responsibilities. Pragmatically, the new manager had experienced the process of learning each facet of the industry – even if s/he began the program with benefit of a formal business education, actually participating at each level offered an opportunity to put future requests [of supervisees] into appropriate contexts. Dad recounted a lunch meeting with that he remembered during which one of the VPs told the younger managers how proud he was of them, how lucky he was to have such an exceptional team working with him. He was confident that the success of the bank was a direct function of the abilities of his management team – and he told them so (Curran, 2009). They were sincerely and practically entrusted to accomplish their respective responsibilities. Those same managers still meet, twenty years after having retired, and still feel loyal to that VP – possible a built-in sense of *family*...

Unfortunately, what began as an active and interesting conversation about creating a “company man” ended with the realization that the old style seems to have gone by the wayside. The banking industry is very different in this new millennium: interstate, deregulated transactions and ownership; a surplus of available employees, effectively eliminating the need for a comprehensive training model; and the literal dying-off of those who understand the value of vestedness drawn from company-specific and sponsored training. The HR style currently pays lips service to the older model with “legislated” training sessions, “jump-in” trainee programs, and CYA-motivated “enhancements” (e.g., promoting administrative assistants to executive administrative assistants).

References

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