



WHAT DOES H.R. STAND FOR?

Andrew N. Bell

[Edited versions of this article were published in;

- **THE STRAITS TIMES, July 25, 2003**
- **CareerTimes, Hong Kong, January 16, 2004**
- **Singapore Institute of Management, HCNG newsletter, April 2004]**

What does H.R. stand for?

The answer depends on whom you ask.

A job applicant will see H.R. standing as a gateway to a new future and is likely to be respectful, probably nervous and keen to impress. They see H.R. as representatives of the corporate image, a source of opportunity and future development. They hope that H.R. is clear on the business strategy and that they have developed appropriate people strategies, policies and practices to meet the business objectives. Naturally the job applicant would also expect H.R. to realize that they are the missing piece in the talent jigsaw.

A Human Resource manager will see H.R. as standing for professional expertise, a conscience for the people values in the organization, a leader and facilitator of change and a key contributor to business success. They aspire to H.R. becoming a strategic partner and are restless for more influence and impact.

All of this is true, it is genuine and it should be a source of healthy ambition for those who work in H.R.

So why is it that when I asked a group of line managers in Asia Pacific what H.R. stands for their contributions included;

Human Remains	Hard as Rock
Horrible Relations	Hardly Relevant
Honest as Rats	Hidden Reasons
Human Ridicule	Highly Rigid
Horrendous Remuneration	Head of Redundancy

I am afraid to say that I received at least 20 more such epithets. Does this confirm that if you ask a silly question you will get a silly answer? Or, is there some important truth in what was said. At the time I was the SVP H.R. for a major multi-national and I had requested the feedback about my own function. Although the response was bound to be direct, perhaps uncomfortable, I deliberately sought out and welcomed the feedback. All professions and functions are subject to such barbed and clever comments. It is important to engage with colleagues in open and healthy debate and be personally confident in dealing with and responding to the reality of what people do think. After all, there were also some positive responses, including;

Huge Rewards	High Rollers
Happy and Rewarding	Helps Results

Although these positive comments were appreciated they not as amusing, insightful or helpful, as the critical comments.

I have shared this experience with many people in recent months. So far no one has disagreed or shown any offense. Quite the opposite in fact. At workshops and conferences in Hong Kong [The Conference Board's annual Asia-Pacific HR Conference], Singapore and Malaysia people have nodded and smiled in agreement and volunteered new epithets for my collection. **Hideous Reward** is a recent contribution from someone in Hong Kong. One major business has asked me to craft a presentation on this theme to be presented to over 400 people at their annual HR Conference of senior managers and HR professionals. I wonder what reception I will get – perhaps I will get pelted with tomatoes or booed off stage. Given that it was the HR department who asked me to do the presentation I don't expect that to happen. After all, I am only sharing a personal experience and my objective is to strengthen the role and impact of H.R. within the business.

A key competence of HR that is often overlooked is personal credibility. One source of credibility is to be able to acknowledge what people are truly thinking and to engage with them. Together with a group of senior HR executives I did an exercise that sought to respond to this challenge of improving credibility. The conclusion was that better aligned strategies and policies played a part but that the key challenge was to change our behaviour, both perceived and real. The brainstorming led to this conclusion:

<u>FROM</u>	<u>TO</u>
Procedural	Passionate – vision & values
Controlling	Trusting, empowering
Protecting	Daring, accountable
Organising	Leading, creating opportunities
Contractual	Engagement

So what is the moral of this story?

Firstly, job applicants should continue to bestow H.R. managers with all the positive professional and behavioral characteristics that both they and the H.R. managers believe in. Why? – Because they want the job and invariably the positives are true!

Secondly, all applicants should beware of quoting directly from this article during interviews with H.R. or line managers. Why? – Because they want the job, you are not yet part of the family and you have not yet earned the credibility or trust to share your personal experience about any function or profession in such a direct way!

Thirdly, all managers, whether in H.R. or other functions, should seek to develop the credibility, trust and personal confidence to openly review with colleagues what is truly perceived as the contribution and performance of their department in general and of individuals within it.

My experience is that those who can do this become better leaders, more effective and more true to themselves. There are many ways to address this including the constructive and confidential use of 360-degree assessment and profiling – instruments such as Benchmarks ® from the Center for Creative Leadership ®, for example. Alternatively you could just ask what your departmental acronym stands for – I can guarantee you will get valuable and insightful feedback. My personal favourite in the feedback I sought was **Help Required** – which I found to be very forthcoming from everybody I asked.

Andrew N. Bell
Managing Director

- **Hemisphere Consulting Pte Ltd**
- **Hemisphere Consulting [Malaysia] Sdn Bhd**
- **Asianic Psychologists Press Singapore**

Not to be reprinted or used without permission