

Building a stronger partnership between IC and HR

When Tracy Hilliard (Human Resources business trouble-shooter) and Claire Grundy (leader and practitioner in Internal Communications and Employee Engagement) joined Comma Partners at their latest networking event, we were treated to a first class display of how much can be achieved when HR and IC really work well together, as demonstrated by their time at Diageo. Alison Boothby reports...

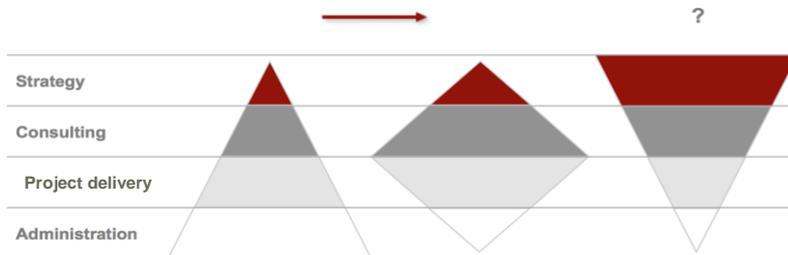
“There is an abundance of opportunity in any organisation for HR and IC to work closely together with a shared agenda – especially around culture, engagement, change and transformation” noted Claire but “when relationships are not good, or when individuals are not capable, there is a tendency to become preoccupied with process and our own fiefdoms.” added Tracy.

Them and us

Talking to several of the communications professionals at the event, it seems we (HR & IC) are divided by a common purpose. Emma Ridgeon, an independent communications professional with experience across a range of large organisations including BP, Logica, EY and Orange told us: “Ultimately our goals are aligned. We are both seeking to move up the value chain (see model below), working in an increasingly strategic way yet this seems to create a degree of opposition at times as one or either function takes the lead.” Alasdair McKenzie (culture, leadership and communications consultant) didn’t mince his words: “Broadly speaking, we’ve got two cost centres, both fighting to forge their reputations and desperate to gain credibility and prove their value to the business. This underlying issue feeds the need for each function to justify their existence,” leading to what Paul Osgood (founder of a business specialising in leadership and employee communication) described as: “...initiative and land grabs!”

It is certainly not out and out war in the majority of cases but as IC and HR practitioners we are perhaps guilty of getting a little parochial at times. Nick Wright, an experienced communications and engagement practitioner has some straightforward advice: “Don’t argue about whose responsibility it is – get on and do your job well. If we want to gain recognition for our thinking we need to do the doing extremely well, and that means we need to be proactive in business-as-usual times in order to maintain strong relationships and collaboration outside of crisis events.”

INCREASINGLY STRATEGIC A similar journey for IC and HR

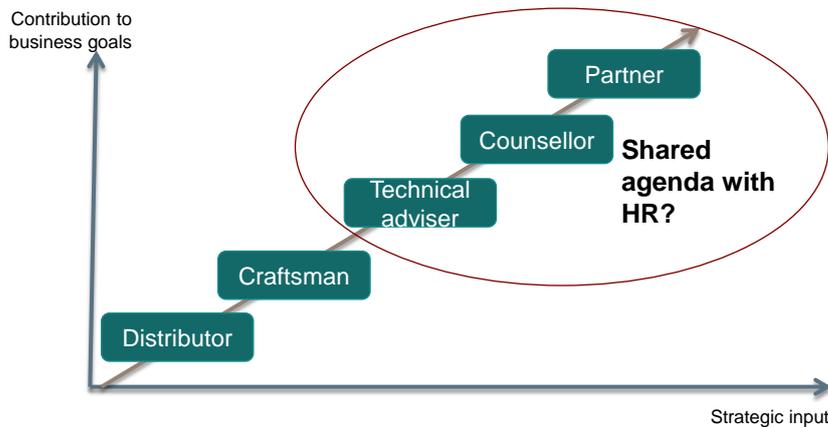


Strategic relationships

There was one point on which everyone we spoke to agreed. At times of crisis, upheaval and significant change, the business situation demands both HR and IC skill sets and it is essential in these cases to work together well. Paul Osgood again: “When we are all focused on the ‘burning platform’ it is easier to work in harmony on the solution.” But the bigger question, according to Alasdair McKenzie is: “Can we build from the great work we do together in those times to establish strategic relationships that add value to the business without the tactical demands?”



BETTER RELATIONSHIPS WHEN IN 'TRANSFORMATIONAL' SPACE



Emma Ridgeon again: “In order for IC and HR to create stronger strategic alliances across the business we need to work with, not against, each other. As IC practitioners, for us to spend more time on the strategic outcomes, we need to improve the communications skills of everyone in the organisation - and in particular the line managers. This can’t be done without our HR colleagues working with us to improve capabilities, providing coaching and creating the right culture.” Nick Wright agrees: “Both sides need to be able to spot the opportunities for bigger picture collaboration and combine that with a deeper understanding of our respective strengths and weaknesses. For example, IC has a role to point out the communication implications of any HR activity, and HR need to see IC as more than a collection of tools and channels. Through both functions we have access to enormous intelligence and must cooperate to use these insights and data to create opportunity for our organisations.”

Stronger together

Alasdair McKenzie takes this a step further: “I see too many IC practitioners confident in their professional skills but less so in their strategic skills. It’s easy to get bogged down in the day to day transactional tasks and of course it is important that these are done well. But we can also be bold. We can play our part in shaping the future of organisations. Are we not expected to come forward and offer our knowledge and insight? Do we know of any leadership team who are reluctant to hear good ideas? Working with our HR colleagues gives us tremendous insight into the heart and soul of the business. We can spot when and where people are ready and willing to foster and germinate innovation; we can see the potential for the future and, importantly, we can get their voices heard.”



Listening to Tracy and Claire share their experiences of their time at Diageo it quickly became apparent that they enjoyed a very good and positive relationship with each other. This was in the context of a brand-led culture with a CEO who was passionate about employee engagement.

Claire Grundy: “At Diageo we used our Engagement Wheel model which had eight sections representing the conditions we needed to create for and with employees for them to be fully engaged with hearts and minds. It was based on a lot of research and experience outside and also inside Diageo, and was validated through the annual all employee survey. It covered everything from inspirational leaders, to pride in our reputation, to a safe and comfortable working environment, to feeling valued. It encompassed great relationships, understanding why we do what we do as a business, and employees feeling that they could progress. Finally it also included our people having a sense of purpose about coming to work. It is not hard to conclude that communications had a very important role to play in building employee engagement. The model created a foundation for us to work closely together and for the IC and HR functions right across the global business to talk to each other. We were expected to have a strategic offer around engagement - a real business partnering role.”

Getting to this shared agenda is the crux of a successful and productive IC/HR partnership and it starts with having the right attitude and forging good relationships.

Great relationships

There are countless personal and business benefits to having great relationships. From an evolutionary perspective it is necessary to have social connections – the human brain has been the fastest growing organ in history – and we all know that we do better when we feel we belong and we feel supported. We also find it easier to try new things, push ourselves beyond our comfort zones and have fun along the way. Translating these qualities into our business lives, the benefits are clear to see: a shared understanding of purpose and ideals along with shared values enable us to be consistent without relying on processes; we feel trusted and supported in taking risks and innovating, and we get things done more quickly.

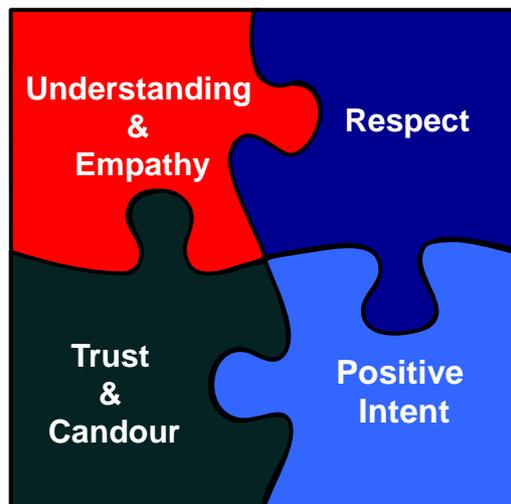
For some people, relationship-building comes more easily than others but there are times where it is a challenge for us all. Paul Osgood: “In reality you can’t just rely on the decency of individuals to get things done and to be successful. Corporate structures, leadership and personal motivations do get in the way and sometimes it takes more than a sunny disposition to keep things on track. Understanding the cornerstones of good relationships helps us to navigate through trickier times and focus on the relationships that matter to getting the job done.” Nick Wright agrees: “It’s all about relationships and the right person will be able to rise above corporate structures and form the right relationships” and Emma Ridgeon adds: “As interims we are in a privileged position to work outside the politics of an organisation. This gives us the ideal opportunity to build strong and fruitful relationships across HR and all functions



gaining respect for delivering tactically as well as challenging the status quo. Strong stakeholder relationships give us license to tackle the bigger issues.”

In order to help us understand the dynamics of good relationships, Tracy and Claire walked us through a model that is useful in diagnosing where a relationship is, understanding why it may be working or not, and giving some sense as to how to improve or even repair it.

REAL RELATIONSHIPS



Relationship model

Tracy Hilliard: “It’s difficult to truly step into someone else’s shoes and we are all guilty of deciding what people are like without really understanding them and their world. This simple model gives us four aspects to contemplate in our relationships with others:

- If we make time to appreciate another person’s motivations and goals we can become more accepting of their feelings and their points of view;
- We earn respect through our competence and credibility and in how we treat others. Look out for what is good in others and believe that everyone has something positive to contribute;
- Be open with your views and emotions, keep your promises and face up to difficulties directly, and finally
- Think positively about the other person, always look to create mutual advantage and focus on win-win outcomes.”

Nick Wright puts a practical point of view on this: “When we have a joint interest and when we understand and respect our individual strengths our partnerships work extremely well. We



achieve the best outcomes for business when we work hand in hand together from the outset.” Emma Ridgeon agrees: “In many sensitive change and transformation situations I rely on my HR colleagues to a great extent. Their knowledge is invaluable and they are expert in dealing with the impacted employees. My role is to link back to the business agenda, creating the bridge between the leadership decisions and how they will be received in the wider business by those who will manage the new business-as-usual after the change. I think in many ways we act as the conscience of the organisation.”

Virginia Hicks of Comma Partners adds: “Interims always need to be adept at navigating quickly and diplomatically through the various stakeholder groups. Contact with HR on projects is inevitably key for a large percentage of interim roles and, as I found when in-house myself, it is not a given that the HR /IC relationship will be straightforward. I think it is important to respect the differences and the wealth of knowledge within the different functions, as one would with IT or marketing colleagues, and then find honest and practical ways to bridge the gap in a harmonious and productive manner.”

Nick Wright summarises: “Finding like-minded HR colleagues can be an absolute pleasure, professionally satisfying and sometimes even fun. Taking the time to get to know them and to form the right relationships will pay long-term dividends.”

Comma Partners provides internal and change communications managers to clients who need high calibre expertise on an interim basis. Clients and candidates can contact Virginia Hicks on 0208 943 0686 or visit www.commapartners.com