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Traits, Skills, and Knowledge Required of Successful Human Resource Leaders

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Traits, Skills, and Knowledge Required of Successful Human Resource Leaders

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Executive Summary

One challenge for institutions of higher learning is developing and redesigning programs and curriculum that will prepare graduates to meet the current and ongoing demands of the workplace. Partnerships between academia and business working together for this purpose are imperative. Human resource management is one of the fastest changing areas in business. This article reports qualitative data collected to explore the general areas of knowledge, skills, traits, and characteristics most important for successful human resource leadership. The results of this study will assist practitioners and academia in the development of cutting-edge human resource leadership programs and curriculum.

One of the continual challenges for institutions of higher learning is in developing and redesigning programs and curriculum so that it will prepare graduates to meet the current and ongoing demands and needs of the workplace. Because the local and global business environment is constantly and sometimes abruptly changing, this is especially true for schools and colleges of business throughout the world. One of the fastest changing areas in business is that of human resource management (HRM). Not only do employment laws and policies continually amend or change, companies continue to change the responsibilities and focus of human resources (HR). In most organizations, HR has evolved into a more strategically involved and aligned function. Because of this, the abilities, skills, and competencies required of successful HR leadership or management have also changed throughout the years. Experts have admitted that it is sometimes difficult for academics and even business professionals to keep up with the changes (Boardman, 1999).

According to Lee (2002), human resource academic programs at both the undergraduate and graduate levels are increasingly important for success in the field of human resources. Because academic programs are considered by many as an important supplier in the overall system of human resources (Kuchinke, 2002), it is imperative that academic programs be carefully designed to prepare students with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to be immediately productive and successful in a workplace HR position (Kluttz & Cohen, 2003). Some admit, however, that HR programs have apparent disagreement over what should be taught (Lee, 2002). Boardman (1999) reported that "increased cooperation between business and academia will make possible a learning process that is ongoing, practical and yet forward-looking-one that not only collects information but disseminates it in a measured and useful manner" (p. 216). Even though it is difficult, it is predicted that partnerships between academia and business will and must continue to expand. Researchers (e.g., Benson, 1985; Wilkerson, 1999) have stated that research studying practitioners' views can assist academic leaders and administrators with some

of the needed justification and knowledge to create new and adjust existing business school academic programs and curricula. Through staying updated, programs and course content can be created and/or adjusted to meet the current needs of the employers who want to hire prepared HR graduates.

To assist in the development of a new human resource emphasis at one of the fastest growing four-year institutions in the United States (Stewart, 2002), a research study was designed to investigate what areas of knowledge, skills, traits, and characteristics were most important for successful human resource leaders (vice-presidents, managers, supervisors) to possess. This article focuses primarily upon the qualitative piece of the research study. It was expected that the results would assist faculty in the creation and development of a cutting-edge human resource emphasis within a business management bachelor degree program.

Literature Review

Many researchers and writers have discussed the essential competencies, skills, and characteristics of effective human resource leaders. Walker and Stopper (2000) explained that “the roles of human resource professionals as business partners and leaders of business change have received considerable attention. Many individuals performing these new roles must develop capabilities in such areas as formulating business and HR strategies, leading change, and redesigning HR processes to support strategy implementation” (p. 38). Fox (2002) found that effective leaders fit with the organization’s culture, communicate effectively with workers, explain what and why, delegate, and then let workers do what they have been asked. Leaders provide training, listen, and help employees move barriers that may be thwarting their effectiveness, keep track of progress, and acknowledge workers successes and improvements. Another source reported that one of the new managerial skills necessary in today’s workplace is that of the ability to sort through large amounts of immediate information (Cornrow, 1999). In addition, “the experts agreed that despite the transformations in business, the emergence of a highly technological and global workplace and new views of the very nature of employment, the dominant HR concerns for the future are much the same as they were in the past: to help people cope with change, successfully find their place in the world of work, and build lifelong careers that are productive and satisfying” (p. 6).

Most HR leaders oversee or manage workplace learning and performance. One American Society for Training and Development (ASTD, 2002) model includes many competencies related to effective management of workplace learning and performance. Analyses of these are helpful in understanding HR leadership competencies. The competency categories include analytical, business, interpersonal, leadership, technical, and technological competencies (see Table 1).

Table 1

Competencies Required for Effective Workplace Learning and Performance Management

<i>Competency category</i>	<i>Competency</i>
Analytical	Analytical thinking, career development theory and application, competency identification, knowledge management, organization development theory and application, performance gap analysis, performance theory, process consultation, reward system theory and application, social awareness, staff selection theory and application, standards identification, systems thinking, work environment analysis
Business	Ability to see the big picture, business knowledge, cost/benefit analysis, evaluation of results against organizational goals, identification of critical business issues, industry awareness, knowledge capital, negotiating/contracting, outsourcing management, project management, quality implications
Interpersonal	Communication, communication networks, consulting, coping skills, interpersonal relationships building
Leadership	Buy-in/advocacy, diversity awareness, ethics modeling, group dynamics, leadership, visioning
Technical	Facilitation, feedback
Technological	Computer-mediating communication, technological literacy

Various individuals and organizations have developed lists of business and HR competencies for employees and leaders. Table 2 includes a side-to-side comparison of two such lists. First, HR leadership/management requires competencies associated with human performance improvement work. ASTD has outlined 15 essential competencies related to effective work and leadership in performance improvement that include industry awareness, leadership skills, interpersonal relationship skills, technological awareness and understanding, problem-solving skills, systems thinking and understanding, performance understanding, knowledge of interventions, business understanding, organization understanding, negotiating/contracting skills, buy-in/advocacy skills, coping skills, ability to see the big picture, and consulting skills (ASTD, 1996). Second, the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE, 2003) has listed its top ten skills or qualities that employers seek in new employees. These include oral and written communication skills, honesty and integrity, teamwork skills, interpersonal skills, motivation and initiative, strong work ethic, analytical skills, flexibility/adaptability, computer skills, and organizational skills. There are similarities between these two lists as can be easily viewed and synthesized in Table 2.

Table 2

Comparison of Competencies

<i>Competencies Associated with Human Performance Improvement (ASTD)</i>	<i>Top Skills/Qualities Employers Seek (NCAE)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ability to see “big picture” • Business understanding • Buy-in/advocacy skills • Consulting skills • Coping skills • Industry awareness • Interpersonal relationship skills • Knowledge of interventions • Leadership skills • Negotiating/contracting skills • Organization understanding • Performance understanding • Problem-solving skills • Systems thinking and understanding • Technological awareness and understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analytical skills • Computer skills • Flexibility/Adaptability • Interpersonal skills • Motivation and initiative • Oral communication skills • Organizational skills • Strong work ethic • Teamwork skills • Written communication skills

Finally, one of the most powerful articles published in the past decade on this issue was Dave Ulrich’s (1998) *A New Mandate for Human Resources*. Embedded within his four ways that HR can help deliver organization excellence, Ulrich highlights competencies that HR professionals should now have to thrive and contribute within the new business arena:

- First, HR should become a partner with senior and line managers in strategy execution, helping to move planning from the conference room to the marketplace.
 - Second, it should become an expert in the way work is organized and executed, delivering administrative efficiently to ensure that costs are reduced while quality is maintained.
 - Third, it should become a champion for employees, vigorously representing their concerns to senior management and at the same time working to increase employee contribution; that is, employees’ commitment to the organization and their ability to deliver results.
 - And finally, HR should become an agent of continuous transformation, shaping processes and a culture that together improve an organization’s capacity for change. (p. 124-125).
- The competencies required to move HR forward in these ways are some of the most important skills and abilities to teach and instill in HR students today.

Competency Models

Many companies have adapted or developed competency models for their human resource professionals (including leaders) (Walker & Stopper, 2000). For example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) developed a list of human resource competencies that includes human resource management, customer relations, business management, information technology, leadership, teamwork, planning and implementing change, ethical response and integrity, organizational awareness, external awareness, diversity awareness, managing oneself, problem solving, decision making, and written and oral communication (NOAA, 2002). Another example is that of IBM. According to Walker and Stopper (2000), IBM's successful HR leaders excel in four key areas and demonstrate a series of related competencies:

1. Focus to win. Understanding the business environment moment to moment and setting strategies for breakthrough results. Competencies include: customer insight, breakthrough thinking, and drive to achieve.
2. Mobilize to execute. Implementing with speed, flexibility, and teamwork. Competencies include: team leadership, straight talk, teamwork, decisiveness.
3. Sustain momentum. Obtaining lasting results that continue to grow. Competencies include building organizational capability, coaching, personal dedication.
4. Passion for the business. Being excited about what IRB technology and services can do for the world. (p. 43-44)

Another important ability that Poe (2002) found was that HR professionals are increasingly being asked to become coaches for a variety of topics including time management, delegation, strategic planning, return on investment, goal setting, stress management, workplace conflict, marketing, giving bad news to employees, and more. In addition, they are asked to be an integral part of organizational changes (such as mergers, layoffs). HR leaders must be competent and have essential skills to function effectively in these areas.

McLagan (1999) explained that human resource development professionals must have the skills to bring HRD/HR practices into congruence with the following emerging realities of work and life: transparency, interoperability, generativity, virtual relationships and offices, self-management, strategic alignment, customer focus, flexibility, rapid knowledge transfer, global relevance, simplicity, and clear added-value.

Theoretical Frameworks

A number of theoretical frameworks were explored to create the first draft of the quantitative section of the instrument and also provides a foundation for HR knowledge required for HR success and leadership. Three of these include McLagan's HR Wheel, Weinburg's HR functional areas, and Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw's (2003) human resource functions. These three frameworks have been integrated into Table 3.

Table 3

Comparison of Human Resource Theoretical Frameworks

<i>McLagan's Human Resource Wheel</i>	<i>Weinberg's Body of Knowledge Areas</i>	<i>Fisher et. al. Human Resource Functions</i>
<i>HRM</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits and compensation • Employee assistance • HR research and information systems • Union and labor relations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation and benefits • Employee and labor relations • Human resource development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensation and benefits • EEO • Employment transitions • HR approaches to improving competitiveness • HR planning
<i>HRD</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Career development • Organization development • Training and development 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Occupational health, safety, and security • Strategic management • Workforce planning and employment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Human resource development • Job analysis • Labor relations
<i>HRM/HRD</i>		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HR planning • Organization and job design • Performance management systems • Selection, staffing, and retention 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing multinational HRM • Performance appraisal • Recruiting • Safety and health • Selection • Strategic HRM

First, McLagan (1989; 1996) presented the various components of human resources in her overall human resource wheel. The model identified the four components most closely associated with HRM as benefits and compensation, employee assistance, union and labor relations, and HR research and information systems. She presented the three components of human resource development (HRD) as organization development, training and development, and career development. Finally, she also explained that the following components are closely related to both HRM and HRD: organization and job design; selection, staffing, and retention; performance management systems; and human resource planning. According to McLagan, putting these major areas together comprises the primary components of an HR program.

Second, Weinberg (2002) authored the *Certification Guide* for the Human Resource Certification Institute. The book reported the general results of extensive research that identified numerous responsibilities, areas of knowledge, and core competencies needed by competent and successful human resource professionals. These results were divided into six functional areas: strategic management; workforce planning and employment; human resource development; compensation and benefits; employee and labor relations; and occupational health, safety, and security. These overall functional areas (and the areas of knowledge presented with each one) were used to support and expand the initial list of human resource topics or areas of knowledge and skills in the quantitative section of the instrument.

Third, Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw's (2003) presented their framework in their HRM textbook. These human resource functions included strategic HRM, human resource planning, job analysis, EEO, recruiting, selection, human resource development, human resource approaches to improving competitiveness, performance appraisal, compensation and benefits, safety and health, labor relations, employment transitions, and managing multinational HRM.

Purpose and Research Questions

To assist in the development of a new human resource emphasis at one of the fastest growing four-year institutions in the United States (Stewart, 2002), a research study was designed to investigate what areas of knowledge and skills were most important for successful human resource leaders. The general goal of this study was to learn more about the important areas of knowledge, skills, abilities, traits, or characteristics required to effectively lead an HR department within an organization. To do this, the following research questions were explored:

1. What areas of knowledge and competence are most important for successful human resource leaders to possess?
2. What additional skills, characteristics, or personality traits are also important for a successful human resource leadership?

Research Methods

This research project included the collection of both quantitative and qualitative data focused around the research questions. This article reports the results of the open-ended qualitative question that asked participants to share their own perceptions on what is important for a human resource leader to know and be able to do. The study's research methodology was as follows:

Instrumentation

The complete instrument consisted of the question, "It is _____ that a human resource manager, director, and/or leader have knowledge and competence in..." Twenty-seven items were then listed in alphabetical order (see Table 4). A five-point Likert scale was used with "1" being not important, "2" being of some importance, "3" being important, "4" being very important, and "5" being of utmost importance (highest). The five demographic questions included job title or position, company size, gender, type of industry, and years of experience working in or working closely with human resources. Finally, the focus of this particular article is on the one qualitative question that asked, "In addition to the ones listed on the other side of this page, what other areas of knowledge or competency do a human resource leader/director/manager need to have to be effective and successful?"

Table 4

Components in the Quantitative Section of the Instrument

Knowledge and Competence Areas

-
1. Attitudes, values, and ethics
 2. Business and HR strategy
 3. Business process analysis
 4. Career/employee development
 5. Compensation and benefits
 6. Employee relations
 7. Employee retention
 8. Employee termination
 9. Employment law and other legal issues
 10. Human resource development
 11. Human resource measurement/evaluation
 12. Human resource planning
 13. Human resource systems
 14. Information management
 15. International human resources
 16. Job analysis and design
 17. Labor relations
 18. Leadership
 19. Management
 20. Negotiations and conflict resolution
 21. Organizational behavior
 22. Organization development (change)
 23. Performance management
 24. Psychology
 25. Selection, interviewing, staffing
 26. Training and development
 27. Workplace safety and health
-

Sample Selection

Employees from many different organizations found within the state of Utah were used as participants for this study. The target population included human resource leaders as well as business executives and managers in northern and central Utah who had a solid understanding and close and continuous working relationships with their human resource leaders and departments. These individuals worked in profit and nonprofit companies of various kinds and sizes and in various industries. Of the 225 surveys originally given to distributors, 220 were found to be actually distributed, and 136 were completed and returned for a 62 percent return rate. Of the 136 completed, 59 surveys included specific responses to the open-ended question asked. It was estimated that surveys were distributed into 65 to 80 different organizations.

Data Collection

The surveys were distributed to participants through contacts of the researchers we called distributors (e.g., an academic program community advisory board, working undergraduate college students, business contacts, and colleagues). Each distributor was provided with general research information and specific criteria about the individuals who should be given the surveys. Distributors were instructed that only 3 to 4 surveys could be distributed within one organization or large organizational unit. Each survey was numbered, and a list was kept of this number along with the name of the volunteer distributor who took the survey. Fifty-six individuals served as distributors of the surveys.

The envelopes given to distributors included the double-sided survey, a consent letter, and an addressed, stamped envelope. These were hand delivered or bulk mailed to the distributors, and they then distributed them via hand-delivery to the appropriate participants who fit the research criteria. The participants were asked to mail the surveys directly to the researchers via an addressed, stamped envelope within approximately 2 weeks. Sixteen days after they were distributed, researchers contacted distributors via phone or email and asked them to remind their contacts to complete and return their survey (if they had not already done so).

Data Analysis

The analysis of the qualitative section of this instrument included taking all of the hand-written responses and entering them into a word processing document. Next, similar responses and themes were sectioned together. Identical answers were deleted, and longer answers were shortened. This process primarily consisted of six versions or drafts. Themes were found, and answers were finally divided into three primary tables: skills, personality traits, and knowledge areas. The major themes from longer and more descriptive answers were extracted for inclusion in the table; however, these complete quotations were also retained for inclusion in the results text.

Results and Discussion

The research questions included inquiries related to determining the most important knowledge or competencies related to successful HR leadership. Hand-written answers related to important personality traits or characteristics, skills, and areas of knowledge.

Personality Traits or Characteristics

Respondents offered 15 statements or words regarding personality traits or characteristics they felt were important for successful HR leadership (see Table 5). These included such characteristics as being caring to employees; having common sense; being courageous; possessing empathy; being energetic; having an engaging persona; being fair, helpful, and honest; remaining non-judgmental; being personable; having a positive attitude; keeping utmost

integrity; and being trustful and trustworthy. One respondent stated that an HR leader must be “fully trusted by both upper management and by rank and file employees.” Another explained that he or she should be “able to take the heat and stand alone when necessary.” The most important trait for another respondent was that the leaders should have “a commitment to ethics and integrity and the courage to stand up for it.” Another stated that the leader needs to have “an ability to help people regardless of situation or personal feelings. Judgmental people do not belong in HR. The ability to keep one’s mouth shut about all things regardless of how small they seem.” Finally, one individual stated that the leader should have the “ability to transmit to employees that you care about them without being unfair to the company.”

Table 5

Personality Traits or Characteristics Needed for Successful Human Resource Leadership

Personality Traits or Characteristics

Caring to employees	Non-judgmental
Common sense	Personable
Courageous	Positive attitude
Empathy	Trustful
Energetic	Trustworthy
Engaging persona	Utmost integrity
Fair	
Helpful	
Honest	

Skills

Respondents offered 30 statements or words regarding skills that they felt were important for successful HR leadership (see Table 6). These statements ranged from skills related to prioritizing, effectiveness, flexibility, and listening well to skills related to written, verbal, and interpersonal communications. In this section, 11 skill-related quotations are highlighted and explored.

Table 6

Skills Needed for Human Resource Leadership

Human Resource Leadership Skills

Ability to prioritize effectively	Multi-tasking
Ability to be a true business partner	Objective
Active and effective listener	Open-minded
Attention to detail	Open to diversity
Competent	Organizational skills
Confident	Presentation making skills
Confidentiality	Responsive (quickly and effectively)
Coordination skills	Strong interpersonal communication skills
Effective	Strong ethics and values
Efficient	Strong work ethic
Experience	Utmost integrity
Flexible	Upfront
Follow through	Verbal communication skills
Inclusive	Willingness to learn
Logical thinker	Written communication skills

First, one respondent stated that HR leaders should be able to “work effectively with other corporate managers.” This comment supports the ASTD competencies that interpersonal relationship skills and negotiating/contracting skills are important in effective work and leadership for performance improvement. Because teamwork skills are also essential to effectively working with corporate managers, this quote also supports NOAA’s (2002) competency list.

Second, another respondent said, “some days being a social worker would be a plus” for HR leadership. Fox (2002) found that effective leaders...listen, help employees move barriers that may be thwarting their effectiveness, and acknowledge workers' successes and improvements. Another source (ASTD, 1996) found that coping skills are essential for effective work and leadership in performance improvement.

Third, an individual’s “speaking ability to convey ideas/vision” was essential for one participant. Fox (2002) stated that successful leaders communicate effectively with workers and explain the “what and why.” This comment supports the ASTD model that incorporates interpersonal skills as a competency related to effective management. In addition, the NCAE (2002) listed oral, written, and interpersonal communication skills among their list of top ten skills or qualities employers seek in new employees.

Fourth, “the ability to prioritize using business judgment acquired through experience” was important to another participant. Cornrow (1999) listed the new views of the very nature of

employment are necessary in today's workplace. Among the 15 essential competencies listed by ASTD (1996), industry awareness, business understanding, organization understanding and organizational skills all appear to be important for skills related to prioritizing. Poe (2002) found that HR professionals are increasingly being asked to become coaches for a variety of topics including time management and goal setting.

Fifth, one respondent stated that HR leaders must have the "ability to coordinate strategy and execution with line/operations." This statement was upheld by several experts. First, Fox (2002) found that effective leaders communicate effectively with workers and explain what and why; they delegate and then let workers do what they have been asked. Second, the NACE (2003) listed oral and written communication and teamwork as necessary skills. These skills are essential in coordinating strategy and execution. Third, Walker and Stopper (2002) stated, "Many individuals performing these new roles must develop capabilities in such areas as formulating business and HR strategies, leading change, and redesigning HR process to support strategy implementation." (p.38) Fourth, McLagan (1999) explained that strategic alignment is one of the skills that human resource development professionals must have to bring HRD/HR practices into congruence with emerging realities. Fifth, Poe (2002) stated that many HR professionals are increasingly being asked to become coaches for strategic planning as well as many other areas. And finally, Weinberg's (2002) research strongly supported the finding that strategic management was one of the six functional areas of effective HR work.

Sixth, one individual stated that HR leaders "need to be accepting of and able to deal with diversity" while another explained that "cultural flexibility" and the "ability to understand and develop rapport in an environment where employers come from various cultures" was of utmost importance. Fox (2002) found that effective leaders fit with the organization's culture. Another expert explained that "...the emergency of a highly technological and global workplace...to help people cope with change, successfully find their place in the world of work, and build lifelong careers that are productive and satisfying" (Cornrow, 1999). NOAA's (2002) list of human resource competencies included diversity awareness as essential. McLagan (1999) stated that one of the skills the human resource development professionals must have is global relevance. Finally, Fisher, Schoenfeldt, and Shaw (2003) purported that managing multinational HRM is one of the key components of HR.

Seventh, one respondent explained that "HR requires extensive multi-tasking – the ability to manage and organize tasks by priority is key to success – the ability to not let the last priority disappear as well." This statement is supported by a number of experts. NACE (2003) reported that flexibility/adaptability and organizational skills were in the top ten skills or qualities that employers seek in new employees. NOAA (2002) listed managing oneself, problem solving, and decision making in their list of human resource competencies. Finally, one of the four key areas of IBM's is, "Mobilize to execute. Implementing with speed, flexibility, and teamwork. Competencies include team leadership, straight talk, teamwork, and decisiveness" (Walker & Stopper, 2000).

The eighth interesting skill-related quote is that students coming out of an HR emphasis should have "some experience in a real work environment (internship)." Experts agreed that despite the transformations in business, the emergency of a highly technological and global

workplace, and new views of the very nature of employment are necessary (Cornrow, 1999). Various individuals and organizations stated that HR leadership/management requires competencies associated with *human performance improvement work*, and ASTD (2002) listed industry awareness in their 15 essential competencies related to effective work and leadership.

Another respondent noted the “willingness to listen and respond appropriately” was also important in HR leadership. Fox (2002) stated HR leaders need to communicate effectively with workers, which includes active listening skills. In addition, ASTD (2002) outlined interpersonal relationship skills as one of their 15 essential skills needed for HR employees and leaders.

Tenth, the “ability to work outside the books” was very important to another business leader and experts appear to agree. Walker and Stopper (2002) explained “the roles of human resource professionals as business partners and leaders of business change have received considerable attention” (p. 38). They further stated, “These new roles must develop capabilities in such areas as formulating business and HR strategies, leading change, and redesigning HR processes to support strategy implementation.” NOAA’s (2002) finding that planning and implementing change, organizational awareness, and external awareness also support the importance of the ability to “work outside the books.” IBM found that understanding the business environment moment to moment and setting strategies for breakthrough results were essential (Walker & Stopper, 2002). As stated previously, other applicable competencies also included having customer insight; thinking creatively; possessing the drive to achieve; implementing with speed, flexibility and teamwork; and having a passion for the business.

The last highlighted skill-related respondent statement is that HR students and professionals should be “associated with organizations such as SHRM and World at Work.” Many believe that being a member of organizations such as SHRM and World at Work help human resource managers keep abreast of the latest information in the field. Attending organizational meetings and reading magazines and e-mail news notes appear to be very effective for practitioners. In addition, these organizations provide a networking system for human resource directors to share ideas.

Areas of Knowledge

Respondents offered numerous qualitative perceptions and suggestions related to areas of knowledge in which HR leadership should have competence. Some of the comments were related to the 27 items from the quantitative section of the instrument. It was deemed that these individuals had stronger feelings about these items and wanted them to be highlighted. These 38 responses are included in Table 7. It is important to note (with all tables) that many items were suggested by multiple respondents. The tables summarize these comments, so there is no overlap. Because most respondents provided only 1-3 word answers and areas of knowledge were addressed in the quantitative section of this project, very few quotations were given. One respondent did note that an HR leader should “thoroughly understand the business and qualify/quantify HR’s contribution to the business.” Others stated that “calculating ROI for HR related initiative” and knowing “how to make money” was essential. A number of respondents answered that it was important to “understand a financial statement” and that “basic business

acumen (i.e., income statement, profit/loss, and balance sheet) is essential.” One executive noted that an HR leader should “be able to work as a business partner and meet their employee’s organizational and HR needs.” Finally, one participant stated that he or she should have a “big picture understanding of business needs.”

Table 7

Knowledge Areas –Qualitative Responses

HR Leadership Knowledge Areas

Behavioral change
 Bookkeeping skills
 Budgeting
 Business accounting
 Business and industry knowledge
 Business finance
 Business management
 Business needs
 Business partnerships
 Business products, services, and customers
 Computer and Internet skills
 Corporate and business goals and strategy
 Crisis management
 Executive recruiting
 Human resource knowledge (everything)
 Human resource legislation (current)
 Human resource strategy and contributions
 Internal business processes
 Interviewing knowledge and skills
 Language skills
 Line vs. staff understanding
 Mergers and acquisitions
 Morale and corporate culture management
 Negotiation skills
 Organization development skills
 Organization redesign skills
 Partnering with other business functions
 Performance management
 Performance reviews
 Policy development
 Progressive discipline
 Project management
 Return on investment for HR
 Rewards and incentives programs
 Risk management

Strategic change
Strategy
Training skills

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

This research study does have a number of limitations that are important to note. First, even though the qualitative data were collected from many different organizations, all companies were located within the state of Utah (primary central and northern). Second, by the time these results are published, new data must be collected for institutions to stay current in their program development and redesign. Because local and global business environment is constantly and sometimes abruptly changing, it is important that research be continued and that partnership between academia and business is continued and ongoing. Finally, a prominent limitation of this study is that respondents may have had different definitions in mind for various HR words. With this instrument, it was assumed that the respondents would perceive similar definitions for terms used. This may not have been the case.

Research focused at learning and understanding the current HR needs of various types of organizations is essential. Much of the current research focuses on HR needs in for-profit organizations. More exploratory research should focus on non-profits and government organizations. Even though there are similarities, there are also HR differences in various types of organizations. More research in the area of personality traits or characteristics needed for successful HR leadership would also be beneficial. Much of the available literature is not based on rigorous research methodologies. Are there essential personality traits that directly lead to more successful leadership in HR? Are these the same or similar with leadership in general? It also appears that additional research would be beneficial in international human resource management. This could prove to be of use and may add additional or different traits, skills, knowledge, and competencies to the lists already provided. This information would not only benefit intra-national human resource management businesses, but also international human resource management of global, international businesses.

Implications for Practice and Conclusion

The purpose of this research was to examine and to investigate those areas of traits, skills, and knowledge required of successful human resource leaders. Through the review of literature and current research, this report offers competencies associated with human performance improvement, top skills and qualities that employers seek, knowledge and competence areas, personality traits or characteristics, and qualitative responses. The focus was to assist practitioners and academia in the development of cutting-edge human resource leadership programs and curriculum. The results suggest that the current responses of the qualitative questions asked of human resource and business leaders were supported by current literature.

As stated, one challenge for institutions of higher learning is developing and redesigning programs and curriculum that will prepare graduates to meet the current and ongoing demands of the workplace. Partnerships between academia and business working together for this purpose are imperative and should be included in an ongoing HR research agenda. The results of this study can be utilized in institutions of higher learning in curriculum development and in redesigning programs that will meet the current and ongoing demands of the workplace. These results may also be of interest to organizations and individuals in the design of training and development programs. By doing so, this information will offer these organizations the opportunity to be aligned with the current needs of the business community in developing and redesigning programs and curriculum to update and prepare their employees for the ongoing demands of the workplace. Through this study and other research of this type, the gap between academia and practice will be narrowed; graduates and current HR workers will be more prepared for the cutting-edge needs of the business community.

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