

Human Resource Challenges in a Multi-party Collaborative Alliance Structure

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Venkataraman Nilakant, Bernard Walker, and Herb de Vries
University of Canterbury, Christchurch, New Zealand

ABSTRACT

Introduction

This paper focuses on the human resource (HR) configuration associated with an alliance structure. The focal organization for this study was called the Stronger Christchurch Infrastructure Rebuild Team (SCIRT) set up to rebuild the damaged infrastructure of Christchurch, New Zealand, hit by multiple major earthquakes in 2010 and 2011. This was an alliance-based organisation with a five-year time lifespan, specifically created for reconstructing the horizontal infrastructure damaged by the earthquakes. The large-scale, multi-party alliance consisted of three funding client-organisations – the Canterbury Earthquake Recovery Authority (CERA), the Christchurch City Council (CCC) and New Zealand Transport Agency (NZTA), along with five civil engineering construction companies – City Care, Downer, Fletcher Construction, Fulton Hogan and McConnell Dowell. The paper focuses on the human resource challenges associated with this alliance, particularly the implementation of a collaborative culture.

Methodology

Given that the context was novel and unique, the study employed an inductive, qualitative method using grounded theory methods for analysis (Charmaz, 2008, 2014). Multiple sources of data were utilised, including (a) Individual interviews, (b) group discussions, and (c) review of internal SCIRT documents such as engagement surveys, exit interview summaries and other management reports, and (d) surveys conducted by the research team. In-depth interviews were conducted with 17 individuals covering the SCIRT Board, members of the Senior Management Team, Delivery Team Leaders, Integrated Services Team (IST) Managers/Leaders, two IST members, performance coaches, and front-line staff. Some key respondents were interviewed multiple times. Data was also collected through five focus groups comprising of 41 individuals from throughout the organisation. A short survey comprising research-based validated measures, including team collaborative climate, integration, goal clarity, team leadership, and employee resilience, adapted to fit the SCIRT context (in terms of work content, workforce characteristics) was administered to 40 individuals comprising of 12 leaders, and 28 team members (covering delivery teams, IST members, functional teams). The interviews and focus group discussions were recorded, transcribed, and independently coded by using NVivo software. Codes and reflective memos used to identify specific themes.

Findings

Initial coding, followed by focused coding coupled with analytic memos, led to the identification of six themes that represented five enabling factors in the collaborative HR configuration (Charmaz, 2014; Saldana, 2016). These were: (a) the Noble Purpose and values; (b) leadership; (c) HR's role as a strategic partner; (d) performance metrics; and (e) coaching.

Building and sustaining a collaborative culture within SCIRT was not a smooth, conflict-free process. There were five key tensions that had to be negotiated. These were: (a) interference from the external context; (b) Capability of middle level leadership; (c) Staff turnover; (d) Inadequate communication & sharing, and (e) Competitive tension among alliance partners.

Contribution

Within this strategic HRM stream, there has been an on-going debate between the approaches of universal HR best practices, and context-specific HR practices (Becker & Gerhart, 1996). Lepak and Snell have argued that these approaches tend to view employment and human capital holistically, ignoring the differences between employee groups within a firm. Accordingly, they developed a human resource architecture relating to four different employment modes: knowledge-based employment, job-based employment, contract work, and alliance/partnership and found empirical support for their typology (Lepak & Snell, 1999, 2002). This study extends the contribution of Lepak and Snell (1999, 2002) by identifying the necessary conditions, and factors that moderate the relationship between a collaborative configuration and organisational performance. It also overcomes some of the limitations of their study.

The study suggests that four conditions are necessary for a collaborative HR configuration to be effective. First, it is vital for the HR function to be accepted into working in a strategic partnership with the organisation's senior leadership. The approach of the senior leader, particularly their willingness to genuinely partner with the HRM function and give the HRM function a broader role in creating all the aspects of organisational culture, is a central factor for creating and sustaining this type of HR configuration. Second, the collaborative configuration requires the alignment of multiple partners towards an over-arching higher purpose. Third, there need to be explicit, transparent and shared performance metrics to measure and monitor the collaborative culture. Finally, coaching and training of team leaders is another vital element, as leaders and particularly middle-level leaders, need to learn new ways of leading, influencing and collaborating with people.

The study suggests that a collaborative HR configuration will be associated with a set of tensions and pressure points. The external context exerts a strong influence on the success of the collaboration, with hostile environments hindering collaborative approaches. Although communication and sharing of information is a key factor of success, the internal dynamics of an alliance, and the system of staff turnover that is often present, can constrain relation-based collaboration and learning. Alongside this, the development of high-quality middle level leadership capability, particularly team leaders, is crucial for the success of the alliance. While competitive tensions can inhibit collaboration, having skilled and competent leaders this can play a significant part in mitigating this. The way in which the leaders view and manage the tensions is the key determinant of the success of a collaborative HR configuration. A leadership mind-set that views these tensions as opportunities for learning, improvement and enhanced performance outcomes is more likely to be successful. The grounded theory methodology used in the study suggests the framework in Figure 1.

The study suggests that longstanding HR models that are oriented to continuing, permanent staff may not be compatible with the newer temporary organisational forms such as alliances and partnerships. This study highlights a need for new models, a re-orientation and a new way of working for HR practitioners in the newer environment.

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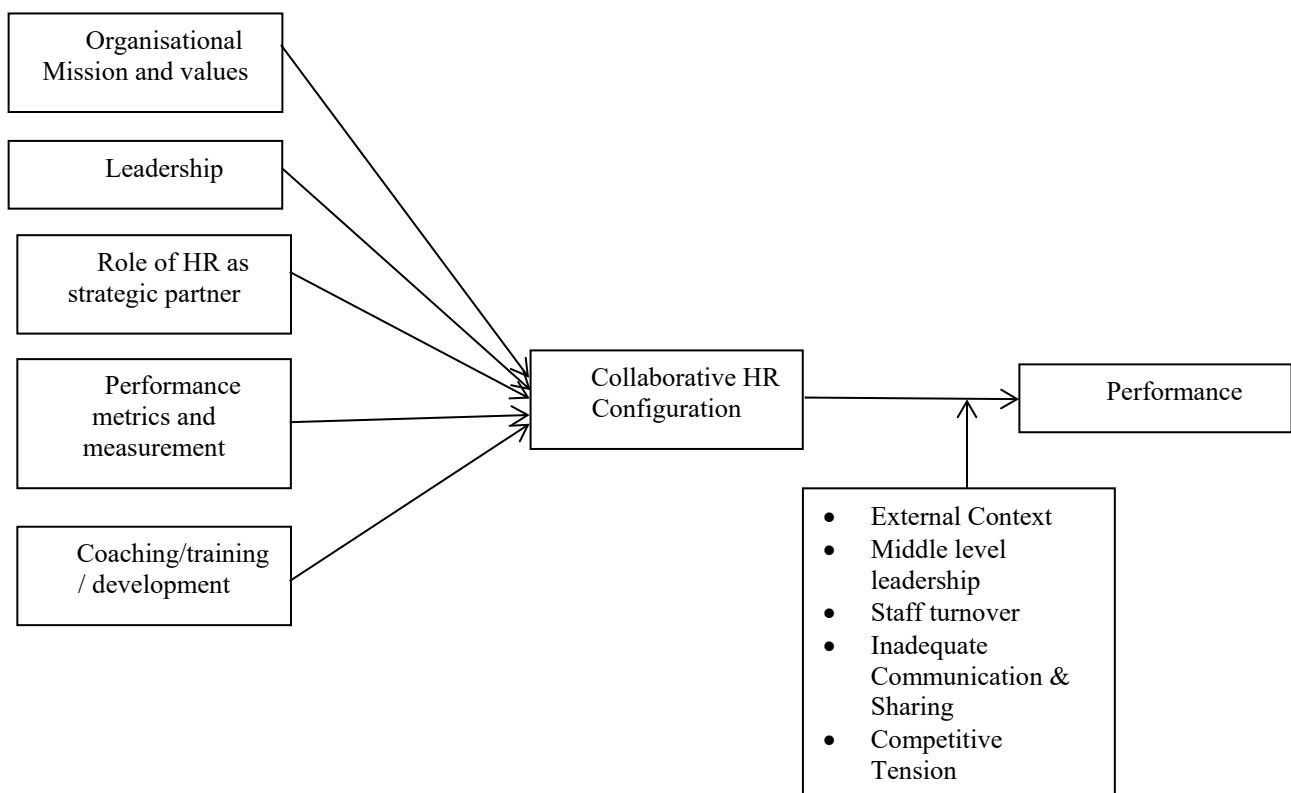


Figure 1: Framework for Collaborative HR Configuration in Alliance/Partnership Structures