

Achieving Remarkable HR During Remarkable Times

Purposeful HR - Insights for 2021

The extraordinary events of 2020 have once again highlighted the centrality of the human context for all organisations. With this in mind, the curiosity of The Mind at Work was inspired to discover how the human resources discipline has been invited and indeed required to respond.

Our research has culminated in the publication of this - The Mind at Work's first Purposeful HR Review, where the views of 32 senior HR professionals, from individual global organisations were obtained, through personal 1-2-1 interviews and online research, with the feedback highlighting the remarkable role that HR professionals play.

What has become apparent, is that this moment requires solutions that transcend the normal approaches to transformation that have characterised business strategies over the past two decades.

Indeed it is our view that what is emerging in the most progressive HR leaders and disciplines is that they are beginning to transform transformation itself with elevated purposes rooted in the humanity of their organisations to create thriving, connected and motivated organisational cultures.

The genuinely remarkable HR professionals we met, were those most aware of their own 'inner state' and most connected to their purposes. In turn, those HR professionals seemed to more readily place deeper purposes and human connectedness at the centre of their leadership and interventions.

As we share our stand-out insights, we would like to express our gratitude to all who contributed to our research. And we look forward to receiving your feedback in the future, as we continue to develop The Mind at Work's response to the ever-evolving context for HR.



Our Findings

1. HR has taken centre stage:

HR professionals have rarely had a more prominent position across the corporate landscape: serving as advisors, planners, strategists, coaches, confidants and communications experts. Increasing numbers of HR professionals have confidently stepped beyond their 'behind' or 'alongside' leadership positions and are now at the forefront of their organisation's strategic decision-making process. This has been an opportunity for HR leaders to present themselves in a new perspective. As the head of HR in a consulting services organisation put it:

"With the human element so prominent in 2020, HR needs to build on this by thinking big about the questions of authenticity, connection, empathy and to avoid the sound-bytes of the past."

- Head of HR in a consulting service

With many organisations already in the midst of large-scale restructuring and multiple efficiency drives, the stage is set for HR professionals to step even further outside of their comfort zones and into more forward leadership positions, to ensure that people are central to their organisation's response beyond the crisis. A talent head in an engineering services firm shared with us that the disruption in their organisation left many line managers reframing their expectations of HR, saying:

"The crisis has provided a reminder of the human element of business. It has required HR to step away from the transactional and partner with line management in defining value through a more human lens."

- Talent head in engineering services firm



2. HR has adapted to an accelerated agenda:

HR's level of activity is accelerating at an ever-faster rate. We heard numerous examples of key decisions being made on a daily basis, and often with limited ability to provide all the answers employees wanted. Many companies that had spent years discussing flexible working policies, for example, implemented them within weeks. Business models have been turned upside down with long-term operational changes being achieved in a few months.

This has had a huge impact upon HR, who have transformed how they recruit, train and communicate, whilst maintaining a focus on performance and inclusion. HR leaders in a global energy company shared with us how large numbers of expatriates and their families were recalled to their home countries at short notice. This caused considerable disorientation to careers and lives and confronted HR with an immediate and large-scale resource planning predicament.

In this context of acceleration, an example of HR taking a leadership position exemplified the voice of purposeful interventions. A country HR head in a global energy company explained how at group level, it had been agreed to provide all employees, regardless of their country of work, a sum equivalent to \$300 towards adapting their homes to prolonged remote working. Within this specific country, a boardroom debate ensued in relation to weighting this sum, depending upon the value of individual national currencies. At which point HR stepped in to say that spending time on localising such a policy was not what was needed while employees were grappling with sudden personal impacts of working from home. The result was that the \$300 benefit remained for all, enabling employees to immediately get on with adapting their workspaces.

In their frequent quest to 'get everything right', the profession can sometimes be regarded as slow moving, yet the crisis has illustrated the speed in which HR can respond and innovate.

"The urgency of the pandemic has required a different response from us, we now act in a more commercial way; we implement the actions now and refine later. The way that HR has responded with such purpose and resilience has been widely acknowledged by the business."

- HR & strategy director in food retail



3. The importance of connectivity:

Whilst the global community has collectively experienced Covid-19, people's individual experiences of the pandemic have varied dramatically. HR has been critical in understanding this dichotomy and helping workers maintain connection between one another and their wider organisation. With a remote revolution being experienced by some, many other colleagues have remained on the front-line; therefore importance of maintaining connection across organisations is vital.

"Finding purpose and being able to align individual purpose with the organisational purpose is an area where we have heavily invested. Yet the crisis has demonstrated the need to align purpose within a whole new context. New approaches to health & wellbeing, work-life harmony and connectivity are so important in a virtual workspace. The past few months have shown how hybrid solutions, which recognise both technology and the personal needs of individuals will connect workers to one another and their organisation's purpose in the future."

- Talent leader in leisure industry

Those HR leaders who have been able to connect their colleagues via a common purpose have helped enable their organisations to prosper during these challenging times. The grocery sector has been a great example of this where a shared purpose of "feeding local communities" has helped connect colleagues at all levels, brought pride in the crucial services they deliver and demonstrated the vital role that many front-line workers have.

In the IT context, the pandemic has seen the shift to cloud computing accelerate at an even faster pace. A global technology company shared that their experience was of a rapid increase in their hiring and onboarding into this part of their business, all against the backdrop of remote working. Therefore the need for supporting new employees to feel included and engaged has been an amplified priority. HR has been recognised as being able to see the organisation in the wider context, and therefore as a source of orientation – something that other disciplines are often unable to do.



4. Fear of burn-out:

Many HR professionals have acknowledged that being in centre stage has been re-energising, invigorating and exhilarating. Many also take pride in the higher levels of engagement and productivity that they have witnessed across their organisations. At the same time, our interviews found that many within the HR community feel “exhausted” and “weighed down” by the responsibility that has been placed upon them. The pitfall that some HR professionals have fallen into was identified by a former HR head in the consumer goods sector:

“Personal leadership in times of crisis is where the rubber hits the road and for many it is an invitation to hunker down.”

- Former HR head in consumer goods sector

In fact a number of respondents specifically mentioned “doubling-down their efforts” and being in “full survival” mode when describing their experiences of 2020. This fluctuation in energy levels and motivation is a cause for concern that will need to be addressed as we move into 2021.





Our Insights

The findings from our research have enabled The Mind at Work to identify key insights that illustrate what we believe will be required from HR leaders if they are to fully respond and seize the opportunities that this moment presents.

1. A shifting mindset:

For HR professionals to achieve remarkable results, they will be required to demonstrate a mindset more expansive and open than surviving the crisis and working hard and fast. This is called the learning mindset, formed from purpose, curiosity and creativity, which needs to be chosen and cultivated consciously and consistently.

2. Being purposeful:

Purposeful HR leaders are not solely motivated by the need for 'survival' or to 'get things done'. Purposeful HR leaders are able to transcend mere crisis management and lead their organisations through intense disorientation; demonstrating the ability to navigate ambiguity with courage, empathy and clear foresight.

3. Fostering human connectivity:

HR professionals will be required to listen and truly understand if they are to respond to such unprecedented events with insightfulness and inclusivity. Those HR leaders who are caring, supporting and listening will be those most able to engender trust, support orientation and build commitment - and in turn deliver a truly remarkable recovery. This is the substance of human connectivity.

4. Being resourceful and inventive

A sole focus upon agility and resilience will not generate all that is required when responding to the pressures and stress associated with an accelerated agenda. HR will be required to be resourceful and inventive, and to know how to create these conditions for themselves. Equipped with these nurturing and nourishing resources, HR stands to unleash hidden ingenuity for themselves and their organisations. This is quite a step up from agility and resilience.



The Way Forward

There is no handbook for HR during these times, but the most impactful leaders will be those who understand that as the situation keeps moving, so too will their learning and approach.

This further comment shared with us, perfectly encapsulates this sentiment:

“This crisis, as a platform for change, has been a huge learning moment. HR professionals now need to detach themselves from any self-perception of not being as worthy as other disciplines. HR’s impact is less about how we may have previously perceived ourselves in comparison to other disciplines and much more about our mindset and what this can achieve.”

- Head of HR at global pet products & service company

As HR takes centre stage, the discipline will have a unique opportunity to innovate and transform both the traditional tools, processes and ways of working, and importantly the mindsets that have been ingrained within many organisational cultures for decades. A transformation of the dimensions of hard and soft wiring, through the lens of human experience is the invitation that exists for HR.

Creating the conditions for this paradigm shift will take work. It will require HR professionals to attend to their ‘inner state’ – their feelings, thoughts and motivations – and connect to a strong and meaningful purpose when leading their organisations.

During this moment of intense disorientation, those with the ability to take stock, re-orientate themselves and consciously choose their purpose will be the ones who lead with the necessary levels of clarity, empathy, resourcefulness and inventiveness that this new context demands.

Here at The Mind at Work we will continue to listen and learn from the HR community as we develop our response to the demands of the present and the future.

Please reach out if you wish to share your experiences with us or want further information on how The Mind at Work can further help create HR leaders ‘of purpose’ and ‘with purpose’.

About The Mind at Work:

The Mind at Work is an independently owned London-based consultancy, established in 2005, which serves an international network of clients.

Our world-class team brings a unique blend of commercial experience and psychological expertise to create sustainable organisational transformation.

We partner clients across diverse sectors, who are often organisations in the process of growing, merging, innovating, solving problems, changing or restructuring.

Our material is personalised for distinct capabilities and customised for specific groups. We adapt to the scale of our clients and have the capability to operate at all levels with experience of delivering across multi-site, global organisations.

Our HR Development Team:



Pascale Ascher

Our founding director has a specialist background in psychology and expertise in personal transformation, group dynamics and culture creation. Pascale works closely with HR and operational functions to design and deliver highly impactful leadership, managerial and cultural programmes.



Noel Lenehan

Noel brings an extensive leadership and cultural change experience from global businesses. A strategic thinker with strong commercial and operational capabilities; Noel is passionate about elevating business performance through its people and has the know-how to make it happen.



Stuart Worker

Stuart has held leadership roles, extensively across Africa and the Middle East. He has directly delivered major global transformation programmes and has unique insights into how to make a significant difference upon organisational change through impactful HR partnering.



Paul Cowley

Paul has a 20-year career in communications, corporate responsibility and leadership development; undertaking leadership roles relating to corporate communications and the embedding of the principles of responsible business and values within organisations.