Managing HR's social challenge

P.V.R.MURTHY & T. T. SRINATH

HR professionals need to understand who they are to forge strong professional relationships, which complement their many different roles.

Social anthropologist Robin Dunbar, author of *How many friends does one person need?*, argues that the human brain has the capacity to accommodate a core group of 150 people made up of intimate family members and close friends, while all others are acquaintances.

According to the humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers, the personality is composed of the real self, the ideal self and, perhaps, though not said in so many words, the social self.

Our real self is who we actually are, while our ideal self is the person we want to be. The social self is the creation of expectations that we live up to in order to meet the challenges of the world. Thus, there is a constant tug of war between the real self, pulling towards itself; the ideal self, pulling towards 'who I want to be' and the social self, in between, that is caught in this crossfire.

Tug of war

It is, however, the social self that is a significant part of who we are and is directed and influenced by society.

Society, thus, creates and defines roles that an individual needs to play and the individual seeks and adopts them. The social self, therefore, craves for social acceptance.

In the above context, in one's role as human resource (HR) professional one needs to be constantly in touch with people, thus, there is also the need to be in touch with self and different parts of oneself.

The extent to which a person is in touch with one's different selves determines his success or failure, effectiveness or ineffectiveness in relating with others.

While relationships take on the complexion of being one of acquaintances, friends and intimate circles, the challenge for the HR professional is to be mindful that relationships may fall into any one of these buckets.

Dealing with people sometimes causes a 'confluence,' a fuzzy cocktail of relationships that prevent many HR personnel from recognising what kind of relationship they are in and what is most desirable in that context.

A senior HR professional, recently retired from service, once lamented that he had no one to talk to. Yet, he claimed that when in employ and living his professional role people would queue up to meet him. Sadly, he said, on retiring no one sought him out.

While this gentleman had perhaps developed his professional role he had ignored his personal relationships. It, therefore, stands to reason that the HR professional has to meld professional and personal relationships inextricably in discharging his duties.

By being in touch with one's real self, acknowledging one's feelings and being authentic, the HR professional can genuinely establish connection with colleagues, peers, seniors, subordinates and the society at large. This also, therefore, strengthens the professional's ability to widen his circles from acquaintance to intimacy.

The challenge of the HR professional to meet the business needs of the organisation by managing human resources, calls into play the need to build relationships.

The complexity of acquaintances, friends and intimate circles causes the HR professional to constantly reassess his relationships. Thus, again, to understand and help others achieve organisational imperatives requires the HR professional to walk a thin line between relating at a personal level and a professional level.

Know yourself

The ability to perceive oneself, including one's strengths and limitations, will help the HR professional gain self-awareness and, in so doing, understand how he/she perceives others.

The self-enquiry clearly will focus on who he actually is (the real self), what is expected of him in his role (social self), and what he wants to become (ideal self).

The HR professional, therefore, is not only responsible for nurturing relationships but also has to demonstrate these qualities by being a role model. They are required to build talent, quantify employee performance and be objective in the way they look at issues and challenges that emerge in organisations.

Therefore, in the context of the HR professional the word 'friend' assumes a different understanding from 'friends' in a social context. Acquaintance, in a social context, may refer to an individual as a 'hail fellow well met' approach; friends, in a social context, may refer to persons whose connections with us go beyond social niceties and the intimate circle will refer to those relationships that might be deep and engaging.

In an organisational context all these three relationships are subsumed into one another and manifest in different ways when relating. When sitting at a negotiating table the HR professional assumes the mantle of distance and acquaintance. When the same person is interacting with an employee, perhaps counselling him and helping him in his journey he takes on the role of friend. Rarely, yet sometimes, when an employee or colleague chooses to share personal details, the HR professional wears the cloak of intimacy.

The classic question HR professionals confront is 'are they friends or professional acquaintances?' The likeness of this enquiry is similar to the confusion an adolescent has between 'love' and 'infatuation.' The answer is to distinguish the two.

If one were to marry the types of relationships that an HR person has — acquaintances, friends and intimate ones — with the three selves the HR professional has to contend with, namely the real self, ideal self and social self, one will quickly recognise that acquaintances are often dealt with by the social self, while friends and intimate ones are subjects of the real self.

The success, therefore, of an HR professional in saddling the role of 'friendship' is to achieve a balance in being himself, responding to social needs and also working towards his ideal concept.

(P.V.R. Murthy is CEO, Exclusive Search Recruitment Consultants and T.T. Srinath is an Organisational Development Consultant and a Human Process Facilitator.)