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Four ways HR can improve business productivity

Practical advice for HR professionals

Lynn Scott

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We all want to be more productive without working longer or harder. And yet with all the technology at our fingertips and the apps that claim to help us organise our lives – things we could only dream of as little as ten years ago – there is still a big problem with productivity (or lack of) in many organisations. Many of us are overwhelmed and struggling to “get it all done” and constantly bombarded with information 24/7.

Human Resources Departments (HRD) are often asked to “find a solution” for managers who are struggling to meet deadlines, not focusing on the important despite hours spent at the desk and are under-resourced and having to do “more with less”. That is the nature of the beast for most of us.

Many moons ago, you may have suggested “sending them on a time management course”. So off they went. They dutifully completed their “time log”, they learned about “important” and “urgent” and how to prioritise, they learned about to-do lists and action plans. And returned to the office with their new-found knowledge and an eye-wateringly expensive leather Filofax (yes, I am showing my age) [. . .] and yet [. . .]. not much changed.

Productivity did not improve

I have nothing against time management courses *per se*. But, most of the productivity problems I have experienced personally and in my 15 years working as a leadership and team coach have nothing to do with “time management” and everything to do with one or all of these four things:

1. lack of time to think;
2. self-limiting beliefs;
3. the wrong conversations; and
4. doing what you have always done.

Of course you might argue that inefficient processes that are not joined up and systems that “don’t talk to each other” also lead to an unproductive workforce and of course you would be right. But, those productivity problems are very visible and very obvious (although the solution might be complex and costly!).

So what is an HRD to do?

The first answer is so easy in theory – and yet for many of us it feels counter-intuitive.

And those are given below.

Make “thinking time” a habit

It is counter-intuitive because our organisations value “getting things done” and “being busy” at the

expense of being productive. Responding to emails becomes the priority rather than really thinking about what we are there to do and what we want to achieve – and how. “Thinking time is for slackers” seems to be the implied message.

One senior executive I coached felt embarrassed about putting “white space” as he called it in his diary because he worried what the rest of the team – who seemed to pride themselves on how late they worked and how many meetings they attended – would think. The idea of turning off all mobile devices and sitting “with himself” and letting his mind “free wheel” was frightening at first. But, the more it became a habit, the more he got things done.

Another chief executive officer (CEO) re-wrote her whole organisational strategy (in her head at first) by going swimming for an hour before coming to work three times a week, something she had been grappling with and getting distracted from, for months.

When I lived in the Yorkshire Dales, I often used to go for a walk with coaching clients. The fresh air, scenery and exercise created far better quality thinking for both of us than if we would be sitting at a computer or in a boxy, airless office.

“Presenteeism is the enemy of productivity” is a mantra I would love more organisations to adopt.

And the more the senior team models the importance of “time out for thinking”, the more it will become culturally acceptable. And I can pretty much guarantee that productivity will improve.

The wrong conversations

On every leadership programme I run, with every senior team I work with and in many of the 1-1 coaching engagements I have delivered, the subject of “difficult

conversations” comes up. And in most cases, we are talking about conversations that have been avoided for weeks, months or in some cases even years.

We avoid what we fear! (And it seems that “difficult conversations” is one of the things we *really* fear).

One CEO I worked with recently found herself in the middle of two fighting colleagues and for months had been involved in “he said, she said” conversations with both of them. This was draining and time consuming and very unproductive. Clearly, she needed to change tack, but she was stuck. When she asked each of them “how can I help you have that conversation with him/her?”, the two started to own their part in the conflict, take responsibility – and deal with it.

The thing is, there is a simple framework for dealing with important conversations that works pretty much every time. But, a framework on its own is not the answer – tools and techniques do not shift mindsets.

This brings me on to the next part.

Self-limiting beliefs and assumptions

In coaching, we often refer to these things as “the inner game”. I am talking about fear of failure or rejection, humiliation, lack of confidence, imposter syndrome, not being good enough – all those things that make us unproductive.

I can stick my neck out and say that *every* “leadership challenge” has an element of self-limiting belief to it. Every challenge I have faced in my *own* life has had an element of self-limiting belief about it. I am sure you are the same.

So it is pretty odd that we do not always address these issues in our leadership training. Instead, we add more knowledge and data into busy

brains which might be interesting but, fundamentally, will not lead to the behaviour change we hope for. Knowing the *WHAT* does not always help us with the *WHY* and the *HOW*. The best leadership training works “below the surface” to get to the heart of what’s really driving us or holding us back.

The thing is, many of us use “not enough time” as an excuse for tackling something when the truth is more about our fear of failure or fear of not being good enough. When we “get” this and can help our people understand and work through these things, it can be life changing. And no trees need to be hugged in the process.

Doing what you have always done

One of my favourite questions is this: “What are we doing that is stupid”? This question was posed during a team event that I ran and it drew everyone up short. Before you knew it, a list was drawn up of all the duplications, waste-of-time meetings and overly long reports (that no-one read) that this team was, frankly, wasting its time on. As a result of this exercise, they reckoned they saved around 4 h per week each [. . .]. Freeing up time to focus on developing and implementing their new IT strategy.

As the saying goes: If you keep on doing what you have always done [. . .].

With a relentless focus and drive to get these four areas “on the table”, an HRD can build a much more productive workforce.

About the author

Lynn Scott is an international ICF Master Certified Coach and Team Coach supporting senior leaders and teams to build leadership capacity one step at a time. Lynn Scott can be contacted at: lynn@lynnscottcoaching.co.uk