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Defining HR Roles of Nursing Line Manager in Workplace Learning

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Abstract

In this paper, HR roles of nursing line manager towards effective workplace learning in Malaysia are discussed. Numerous researches had examined the devolving of the HR roles in various perspectives and general roles of line managers in nursing. However, less study has been paid specific to the HR roles of nursing line manager towards effective workplace learning, especially in the context of Malaysian public hospitals. This paper argues that line managers play a vital role in the development of their employees. In Malaysian healthcare services, where Malaysian nursing shortage is critical, it is essential that nursing line managers play pertinent roles in the development of their nurses learning. In this paper, the researchers integrate HR Business Partnership Model by Conner and Ulrich into HR roles of nursing line managers in Malaysian public hospitals. In particular, this paper attempts to explore the level of nursing line managers' involvement in HR roles in relation to strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion roles. Several prepositions are highlighted and developed.

1. Introduction

Year 2013 witnessed several of Malaysia's effort in becoming a key player in the healthcare industry. From the recent 2013 Budget and 10th Malaysian Plan, Malaysia emphasized on developing the healthcare industry. As in 2013 Budget, the Malaysian government focused on enhancing the well-being of the public with total allocation of RM20 million especially in establishing 70 new 1Malaysia clinics (Business Times, 8 October 2012). Unfortunately, skilled human capital shortage is one of the major

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problems in Malaysia (Barnett *et al*., 2010). A significant shortage of highly trained nurses in the healthcare workforce is not a new issue. This issue urges medical professionals to arise with various plan to fill up the shortage. By defining HR roles of nursing line managers towards effective workplace learning will help the nursing sectors to minimize this shortage. The purpose of this paper is to define HR roles of nursing line managers in Malaysian context. This paper hopes to provide a review to the importance of HR roles of nursing line managers thus could promote better workplace learning within the healthcare sector in Malaysia.

2. Literature Review

This section involved review of literature regarding HR roles and workplace learning.

2.1. HR roles

HR business partnership model was developed by Conner and Ulrich (1996). Ulrich claimed this model will add value to the organization as a respond to cope with competitive business environment (Lemmergaard, 2009). The four key roles of HR are strategic partner, change agent, administrative expert, and employee champion.

The first key role is strategic partner which involved strategic focus and more processes oriented. This key role is responsible in designing the organization to realize its purpose and direction. In addition, the main expected outcome which is to execute intended corporate strategies need to execute this role thus, leading the organization to achieve its goals. Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) claimed the main aim of HR function is to deliver the "*best fit*" which focuses more on customizing HR strategies to organizational goals instead of adopting a "best practice". Against this background, Lemmergaard (2009) argued many organizations are still unable to include HR managers in any strategic decision-making processes thus minimizing HR managers' roles.

Administrative expert is at the same column as strategic partner in processes but focus more on day-to-day or operational level HR activities. At this point, the key person need to ensure traditional HR processes such as recruitment and training are carried out efficiently and effectively. Ulrich (1997) viewed employees as cost. He proclaimed administrative expert can manage to reduce the cost thus increase organizational efficiency by making the right administrative decisions.

Following this is the role of employee champion. Employee champion is at a different column to strategic partner but share the same day-to-day operational focus together with administrative expert. The main tasks performed are based on day-to-day or operational focus and employees issues. While dealing with the need of employees' well-being, employee champion is responsible in increasing employees' commitment and capabilities. Furthermore, this key role is basically closely related to training, development, reward, commitment, retention, and employees' competences. In 2005, Ulrich modified his employee champion key role by dividing it into employee advocate and HR developer thus focusing more into future focused process role.

In shifting from day-to-day or operational to future or strategic focus, the fourth role, the change agent emphasize on people and aims in dealing with the change and transformation faced by the organization. According to Ulrich (1997), this role is also responsible in assisting employees to cope with their attempts to implement change. Delivery of organizational transformation and culture change are the main issues

needed to manage which mean they themselves are able to change according to the conditions. They need to be change promoter and are the ones responsible to initiate change. In general, there some criticisms that arise from this HR role framework (Renwick, 2002; Antila, 2006; Harris, 2007; Watson *et al*., 2007). They debated that "*only the HR players who master these roles simultaneously truly add value and contribute to an organization's ability to compete in a significantly expanded playing field*". The HR function, as per mentioned by Tracey and Nathan (2002), is often being separated from the rest of the organization despite of its widely recognized importance thus enable the players to master its role. It could be argued that Ulrich and Brockbank (2005) viewed what defines HR strategies as too simple (Boxall and Purcell, 2003). Despite of some weaknesses and critics from other scholars, many researchers are employing this model in considering today's HR roles. The researchers such as Lemmargaard (2009) believe that the roles of HR in promoting better execution of learning and development initiatives can be improved through deploying these HR roles to line managers. An ideal line manager is hoped to fulfill these HR roles with the intention to improve development and performance of employees within the Malaysian healthcare industry. The researchers are concluding that most line managers' focuses on HR role as an employee champion. Some of these issues arise from the lack of managerial skills, reluctance in accepting new roles, slow progress in coping with HR functions, and workload which results in negative outcomes of HR's involvement in strategy (Bennett *et al*., 1995). Otherwise, when line managers flourished in doing their new tasks well, they managed to identify each of their subordinates that needed to be sent for training in order to increase their professional development. Other opinions by Siugzdiniene (2008) stated new role of line managers in performing HRD functions especially in learning initiatives includes discussing on continuous learning and development needs of their subordinates, creating partnerships with HR personnel in dealing with strategic HRD issues, training and coaching subordinates and also participating in HRD strategy development process. All of these delegations can assist organizations to excel in their business since line managers are the ones who knows the best for their employees, clients, top management, and also stakeholders. According to Hay (2002), the main rationale employees leave their jobs is due to discontent on how their competences are developed, usually due to the poor quality of their relationship with their direct manager, or line managers. Therefore, even if HR practices were believed to be effective, the HR system might still not be effective because line managers do not know how to implement human resources practices successfully on the work floor. Therefore, line manager's roles in HR initiatives are eminent to ensure that proper goal of HR initiatives is reached. Lemmargard (2009) also argued that HR functions do not always interact productively with line management and line managers end up doing administrative work which later only bring little impact to organizational effectiveness. Bates and Khasawneh (2005) used learning transfer climate as a mediator between learning organization culture and innovation. They argued that with existence of learning transfer climate, organization innovation will increase.

2.2. Workplace learning

Effective workplace learning in healthcare industry is crucially needed in ensuring better services are provided to patients. The nature of this workplace demands a critical attention because even the slightest mistakes, can jeopardize a person's life. Thus, anyone involved in the health care industry especially registered nurses must consistently equip themselves through continuous professional development in their working space.

Learning in the healthcare industry can be challenging due to the nature of the job itself, lack of time, excessive workload, and support from top management. During as early as 1990s, the issue of workplace learning had received increasing attention from scholars and professionals (Poell and van Woerkom,

2011). Learning in the workplace is believed has started since a century ago, since then, there are numerous scholars (Shipton *et al.*, 2002; Coetzer, 2006a; Coetzer, 2007b; Macpherson and Jayawarna, 2007; Samrook, 2008; Coetzer and Perry, 2008) competitively give their insights regarding the notion of learning especially in human resource field. Workplace learning is believed to become solutions for most organization issues. In the early years, relationship between employees' learning and workplace learning are found limited and bounded to formal learning. As for now, the workplace offers learning opportunities in any types of learning (Matsuo and Nakahara, 2013).

Workplace learning is not just a talk of town anymore, it has become a widely concern initiative for each and every organization to develop their human capital to accelerate their business success. Working in the new era of knowledge as powerful assets, employees nowadays are extremely aware of their own learning curve but with little push from their managers will arguable increase their learning desire. Thus, learning becomes essential in adapting to changing environment (Doyle and Young, 2007; Crouse *et al.*, 2011). As much as many learning practitioners perceived workplace learning as a burden cost, shifting it as an investment will bring more positive changes in the organizations. Smith (2000) stated workplace learning can improve current job performance, improve quality of goods or services, respond to new technology, develop a more flexible workforce, and improve employee safety in the workplace. According to Longenecker (2010), learning has become a crucial tool for managers to achieve higher level of performance, deliver better results, to be promoted and to secure their job. It is because at the end of the day, what matters are the learning outcomes. Nilsen *et al.* (2012) proved that outcomes from actual workplace learning can positively affect job performance thus increasing profits. Learning is persistently associated with performance and job satisfaction (Thomas and Qiu, 2012). As far as workplace learning is concerned, managers who are responsible in executing these functions are also important.

Recently, devolvement of human resources roles to line manager has been recognized as gaining competitive advantage over competitors (Papalexandris and Panayotopoulou, 2005). Line managers are the closest person to employees and management thus this will ensure effective communication among them. A good relationship will increase company performance, productivity and efficiency (Kreissl, 2011). According to Harrison (2011), the recent trend in learning activities indicated an increased decentralization of HRD function to line managements' training investment, human capital reporting, the emergence of a new knowledge economy and also a focus on workplace learning. Similarly, CIPD (2009) also pointed out the greatest changes in learning and training methods are the introduction of new programs to develop the role of line managers and effort to develop a learning culture across organizations. This situation has proved the importance of line managers in executing human resource function. Line managers do play a crucial role in relation to encourage employees' continuous learning and development (Harrison, 2011).

3. Development of Propositions

Developing on the propositions for identifying HR roles of nursing line managers is important in improving workplace learning especially in hospitals. In hospitals, most research focused more on medical research rather than management specifically on nursing line managers. Thus, this proposition hopes to help nursing line managers in identifying their HR roles in moving towards effective workplace learning.

3.1. There is a positive relationship between change agent role and effective workplace learning

Researchers such as Papayotopoulou and Papaplexandris (2004) revealed strategic partner need certain competencies like general business skills, strategic analysis and strategic leadership to execute their role effectively. In contrast, Long *et al*. (2011) found mean score for strategic partner items is lower than administrative expert and employee champion but little higher than change agent. These results showed that HR roles are stronger in day-to-day basis and more focused on operational. Strategic partner and change agent are more focused on strategic planning thus these roles are usually being forgotten along the way. These findings are aligned with Conner and Ulrich (1996) and Raub *et al*. (2006). They found that these managers spend less work time to execute the strategic partner role. In nursing, the strategic partner role is rarely discussed.

3.2. There is a positive relationship between change agent role and effective workplace learning

Wright (2007) argued HR practitioners should emphasis more on their role as change agent. This is because organizations need to change for them to grow stronger. Research by Long *et al*. (2011) again showed lower mean score of change agent compared to administrative expert and employee champion. In contrast, the result of multiple regression analysis from the same research revealed that change agent significantly contributes to one of the independent variables. Similarly, researchers like Papayotopoulou and Papaplexandris (2004) and Wright (2007) also agreed that those HR practitioners need to possess certain competencies to play a vital role as change agent in organization. Similar case with strategic partner, change agent role also merely touched in nursing line managers' role in general or specifically.

3.3. There is a positive relationship between administrative expert role and effective workplace learning

Most of empirical research found administrative expert as the most vital role in HR function (Long *et al*., 2011; Raub *et al*., 2006; Conner and Ulrich, 1996). This is because mostly HR function is done by administrative expert role. These findings provide clear evidence regarding importance of administrative role in an organization. In nursing, most of general task for nursing line managers involved administrative expert role such as executing hospital's mission, ensuring their registered nurses do their job well, maintain legal, regulatory, budgetary and safety standard in their units, and also recruiting new registered nurses.

3.4. There is a positive relationship between employee champion role and effective workplace learning

Conner and Ulrich (1996) pointed out line managers tend to focus on employee champion role. These findings also are similar to studies by Raub *et al*., (2006) and Long *et al*. (2011). In nursing, employee champion is one of key role in managing their staffs beside administrative expert. Tasks like assigning registered nurses to go for training and managing others learning activities concerning their registered nurses are more like daily routine for these nursing line managers.

4. Discussion and Conclusion

All in all, the literature review revealed the involvement of HR roles is crucial in triggering effective workplace learning. In determining effective workplace learning, the responsibilities fall in hands of HR personnel and recently into line managers. Nursing line management needs to play an active role in

encouraging their subordinates to pursue their career development. This is a concern especially now within this sector, as most of employees becoming more aware of their own learning and development. The quest is to ensure that line managers aware of their responsibility in providing maximum learning opportunities to all of their staffs. In the long run, the outcomes of this paper will hopefully modify the roles of nursing line managers to be in congruence with the HR Multiple Roles Model in deploying effective workplace learning in healthcare industry.

Acknowledgements

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