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The Management of Human Resources among Community Colleges in Thailand

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Abstract: Human Resources Development (HRD) is gaining increasing attention in both private and public sectors in order to enhance effectiveness and efficiency. This research study aimed to investigate the Human Resources Development interventions used among public community colleges in the northeastern part of Thailand. Community colleges were established to provide formal education and vocational trainings to adults who did not have a chance to attend colleges and universities during their childhood, due to poverty or lack of access and several other reasons. An objective of community colleges was to provide technical and vocational skills so that graduates can start their own businesses. The colleges' personnel need to keep updated with academic and practical knowledge so they could teach more effectively in the fast changing globalised world. However, these colleges were set up as governmental units operated under a strong centralized bureaucratic system. While the Thai government tried to promote personnel development, there were many protocols and procedures that personnel had to follow and might inhabit their initiatives. The Human Resources Development practices were mostly emphasized on training related to procedural information for administrative control. This research study was designed as an exploratory study to gain better understanding about the Human Resources Development interventions that the Thai government used with community colleges.

Focus group and individual in-depth interviews were performed with selected personnel in four community colleges in the northeastern region of Thailand. Results revealed that personnel in different positions and localities had different focus on needs for development. The majority of the development programs were planned by the central office. Some Human Resources Development interventions and practices corresponded with personnel's need while some did not. Most personnel described their need for the central office to allow for more autonomy and supports especially in pursuing further study. College leaders had major roles and influences on the developmental direction of personnel. The central office should restructure the Human Resources Development practices to be more decentralized and respond to each locality's requirements. Collaborations and networking among colleges should be promoted.

Keywords: Community college, human resource management, human resource development, Thailand, personnel.

Introduction

People are involved and needed in all aspects of organizations. Hence they are considered the key to the success of every organization (Kruger, 1998). It was found

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that human resources can create sustainable advantage for organizations (George & Hegde, 2004). With proper commitment and motivation among personnel, competitive advantages can be created and sustained. Rucci, Kirn, & Quinn (1998) reported a causal relationship between workers' satisfaction and customers' satisfaction. Satisfied workers tend to be more willing than unsatisfied workers to serve. With proper training satisfied workers are more capable and willing to satisfy customers. Unhappy workers are less likely to offer pleasant services. Service quality can be enhanced by employees (Sureshchandar, Rajendran, & Anantharaman, 2002). They are contact points between organizations and customers. A well-made organizational plan can be ruined by low quality (Kaufman, 2010). It is imperative that organizations should train and develop human resources regarding skill, knowledge as well as attitude so they can deliver excellent results. For this reason, Human Resources Development (HRD) is receiving increasing attention in both private and public sectors (Chermack, Lynham & Ruona, 2003). Inferiority in HRD is likely to result in negative performance.

The aim of this research study was to investigate the HRD interventions and practices among public community colleges in Thailand with the focus in its northeastern region. The operations of community colleges in Thailand are under the supervision of a central authority named the Bureau of Community College Administration (BCCA). Starting from 2002 to 2009, the Bureau has established altogether 19 community colleges to serve the needs for formal degree programs and vocational training courses to people in communities that universities did not cover. These colleges were relatively new at the time of the study, there was a strong need to train and develop personnel to set the future pace. Community colleges operate as a government education unit under a strong centralized bureaucratic system. While the Thai government tries to promote personnel development, there are many mandated protocols and procedures to follow. It is interesting to examine the pattern of HRD interventions used by such governmental unit. Hence, this research study was designed as an exploratory study to gain better understanding about the HRD interventions and practices that community colleges used, specifically regarding the effectiveness as perceived by the personnel. Hence, the research question was posed as:

RQ: What are the HRD interventions that community colleges in the northeast of Thailand used in order to develop personnel?

Literature

Thai educational institutions are supervised by the Ministry of Education. The Ministry administered the operations of several units including the Office of the Higher Education Commission (OHEC) and the Office of National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) to make sure that the operations of public and private higher education institutions maintain the same standard level. Public universities were parts of the government system. Operations were performed as a bureaucratic governmental unit. Usually, decisions were centralized at the Ministry. The Ministry controls budgets of all public educational institutions. However, the government decided that from 1998 onward, public universities would

be decentralized but OHEC and ONESQA shall maintained the control of quality in education (Office of the Higher Education Commission, 2009). This process took more than a decade to transform universities on a one-by-one basis. Until 2009 some public universities are still undergoing the transformation process. The transformation brings about tremendous needs for HRD interventions especially for the transforming of fundamental attitude toward servicing stakeholders.

Human Resource Management (HRM)

In the past, the management of personnel, or Personnel Management, was limited to a few tasks such as recruitment and selection, welfare and compensation, training, and the handling of personnel and other relevant legal matters (Davis, 2006) such as calculation and filing social security, withholding tax, and etc. The changes of management paradigm from scientific management to humanistic approach (Argyris, 1957, Argyris & Schon, 1978) instigated the worldview that realized socio-cultural contributions that employees offer to organizations. It was found that human did not only work for organizations but also influence and shape the way the organization operated (Looise & Drucker, 2002). This approach suggested that human was not just a passive object. Operationally, they are an important factor and should be utilized to create values to the firms (Reisinger, 2000; Struemer, van der Klink, & van de Brink, 1999). Hence, it was more appropriate to look at employees as one of the important resources that company should invest in. Financially, this resource could provide both present and future returns on the investment. The worldview of personnel management was evolved into the Human Resource Management (HRM) approach. In the HRM approach, most functions of personnel management were maintained, but with a different perspective. HRM encompassed a more strategic aim (Davis, 2006) and a concern for the development of personnel in tasks, career and personal lives.

Human Resources Development (HRD)

Training refers to the delivering of skill, knowledge, and attitude to workers to perform their present job while development refers to the improvement of skill, knowledge, and attitude for future, foreseeable and unforeseeable, jobs (Delahaye, 2009). Nowadays, the Training and Development (T&D) function of HRM was changed fundamentally from their origin under the umbrella of personnel management. In the past, T&D was limited to training people for skills necessary to perform their current jobs well. Later, development was added as a reflection of the perspective that human could create future benefits for the firms. Swanson (1992) suggested that training and development can increase the effectiveness and efficiency of workers. Development helps to prepare personnel for their future jobs. A more recent perspective view that “future job” should include not only jobs in the organization who offered development for personnel but also for jobs outside the organization. O’Connell (1999) reported that employees who were individualistic preferred training for skills that could apply to other workplaces.

The concept and practices of T&D was evolved into Human Resources Development (HRD) with the infusion of T&D, organizational behavior (OB), and organizational development (OD) (Hill, 2002). Training and development should aim, not only at

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improvement performance but also, to change workers' behaviors and result in the organization-wide improvement. Dilworth (2003) suggested that HRD consisted of strategic change management, knowledge and learning, career planning, and employees' well being. Employees should be developed not only as a company's asset but also as an individual with free will. Stakeholders are expanded from only an organization to include the personnel him/herself (Ruona, Lynham, and Chermack, 2003). It is extended beyond T&D simply for works into training and development for personal life such as work and life balance (Kirkman, 1981).

For the above process, the management of knowledge and learning are necessary (Delahaye, 2005). HRD goes beyond training people to do jobs for the efficiency of organizations into training people to change their mindsets and to be responsible for their own career and life. The focus has shifted from organizational objectives into mutual objectives. Training and Development process is shifted to become sociological informal learning in the workplace (Mankin, 2009). HRD interventions occur at the individual, group, and organizational levels.

In this regards, workers are adults who have different learning process from children. Knowles (1980) suggested a self-directed learning process. HRD practitioners should play the role of facilitators rather than teachers (Knowles, 1990). Birzer (2003) supports that this teaching approach is more effective than other behavioral teaching and learning methods. In general, the T&D intervention includes training need investigation, designing the transfer of learning process, implementation and evaluation of results (Delahaye, 2005). While the aim of HRD has shifted to enable personnel to think out of the box and created changes in the organization, one of a bureaucracy's notable characteristics is to keep everything in order under strict rules and regulations. Hence, it is interesting to investigate the bureaucracy's HRD intervention process.

Governmental or Bureaucracy Paradigm

Traditionally, public organizations monopolized markets to a more or less extent. There were few, if not no, competitors for customers to turn to if they were dissatisfied with the products or services. Customer satisfaction was comparatively less emphasized. The house of representative draws laws and regulations for the government to conform to. Hence, it is important that all governmental units should operate in the manner that requires personnel to focus more on the established rules and regulations. The right protocol is valued more than good services. Personnel have to make sure that they follow the right protocols even though the process might create complication or difficulty for customers. As long as the personnel follow rules and procedures, they would be fine. Pleasing customers is not an agenda. This becomes the traditional dominant worldview among civil servants in Thailand. The bureaucracy procedures are prioritized over individual treatment (Robbins & Coulter, 2009). The bureaucratic system results in rigidity and is less efficient in responding to changes in the environment (Child & McGrath, 2001). In the attempt to be more responsive with changes in the environment, modern bureaucracy maintains control but allow some personnel participation (Josserand, Teo, & Clegg, 2006).

In the modern era, stakeholders' voices are attended to more than before (Alsbury & Whitaker, 2007; van de Ven, 2005). There are calls for equality and better treatment for people as well as good governance practices in the public sector. The modern environment requires civil servants to develop themselves both in attending to the bureaucratic system and offering satisfying services to the civilians. Hence, civil servants have to develop their skills, knowledge and, especially, attitude accordingly. The Thai government realizes the disadvantages of bureaucratic system and the importance of flexibility. She is trying to release higher governmental agencies from bureaucracy by appointing several independent agencies including CHE and ONESQA.

Methodology

The researcher applied for approval from the Bureau of Community College Administration (BCCA), the governing authority of community colleges in Thailand, to conduct a research study and collect information from personnel in the local community colleges. Northeastern region of Thailand was selected as the location of the study because the colleges in this area are comparatively more successful than colleges in other parts of Thailand as suggested by the Bureau. The researcher sent letters of introduction together with the approval letter from the Bureau to director in each of the four community colleges in the northeast of Thailand. Telephone calls were made to make appointments with directors and personnel who were selected by the directors to participate as informants. In-depth semi-structure interviews were performed with the directors and three personnel in each college during March 2009. Focus group interviews, consisted of 4-6 personnel, were also performed at each college with personnel. Questions were related to the HRD interventions and practices of each college. The interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher.

Results and Discussion

Regarding the personnel appraisal method, the Thai government has introduced Human Resource Scorecard approach of all civil and government officials. HRM practices are measured on 5 dimensions: alignment with organizational strategies, HR operational efficiency, HRM program effectiveness and HR accountability, quality of work life. Strategic alignment includes workforce analysis, talent management and HRD. HR operational efficiency relates to accuracy and timeliness in all HR functions as well as HR database via information technology while increasing HR productivity and value for money. HRM program effectiveness refers to the retention of personnel, employees' satisfaction, knowledge management and performance management. HR accountability covers the good governance and ethical approach in HR. Quality of work life is introduced in order to create good relationship among officials as well as the management of benefits beyond what is required by law (Office of the Civil Service Commission, 2009).

Personnel in community colleges were classified into three categories: civil official, government official and annual contract workers. The government's human resources

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system is transitioning from civil official system to government official system with new sets of HR schemes especially compensation and promotion systems. The government has an objective to gradually end the civil official system by recruiting less civil officials but more government officials in order to increase the morale and improve the efficiency of civil service system. New position classification and compensation systems for Thai civil service started in 2002 and were launched in 2008. Positions are categorized into three groups: general positions, specialized or professional positions and management positions. These positions are categorized into 11 levels starting from level 1 for clerical to level 11 for permanent secretaries or senior advisors (Office of Civil Service Commission, 2010). All Human Resources strategies including Human Resources Development are structured around such categorization.

The bureau determined standard job descriptions and job specifications for all colleges. For the recruitment practice, positions in each college are determined by the Bureau. When there is an opening, the college would make a human resource requisition to the Bureau. The Bureau organizes periodic recruitment process and assigns personnel to the college. Selection is based on aptitude test, technical skill test and traits assessment. However, behavioral assessment is not performed in the recruitment and selection session. Selected directors of several community colleges comprise a committee to draw test papers. As to the time of interview, several positions in some colleges were left unfulfilled for years due to procedural problems. The recruitment process is performed twice a year throughout the country. In some years, there were no applicants with the required major or field of study as requested by the college. In some years, applicants could not pass the exam. There was no further action by either the Bureau or the colleges. A director said that *"we had two job openings for 3-4 years since I became the director in this college but so far there is no replacement yet."* They passively kept waiting for the Bureau to recruit people. The director seemed to have no worry about this issue. The burden was pushed to personnel who had to struggle and share the amount of jobs. One of the personnel said *"I have to do everything on my own, use my own car to visit communities. Those who are not dedicated enough cannot stand for long."* Hence, the quality of works might not be as good as it could have been. This contributed to the problem of limited time for personnel development because they had full-hand of jobs. The human resource demand was not satisfied hence jobs were not properly executed.

An important issue many people raised was about condition of work. Several people mentioned that their jobs were suppressing *"I came here in the hope for a better condition in a higher education institution but it turned out opposite to my expectation."* Some personnel worked for vocational school before. They worked under the governance of the Vocational Education Act with less benefits and privileges than community colleges which belong to the CHE. They thought they could proceed with academic career but it turned out they had to deal with all work routines and teaching classes seven days a week with no time for academic advancement.

Each college included HRD plans in the annual budgets subjected to approval from the Bureau. These HRD plans ranged from educational trips to training classes for

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various operational tasks. Most of the trainings aimed at delivering knowledge necessary to perform current jobs. The Planning Committee of each college together with the director would investigate the needs for training, design and implement the method for training, usually in the form of training courses. The evaluation of the results was performed through personal observations of job improvement. A few colleges offer training programs regarding the well-being of the personnel, such as meditation course and a course to inspire working spirit, but that were limited to only a fraction of overall training courses. Another channel was on-the-job training since some jobs needed hand-on experience such as going out to visit community members. This approach was easy and popular among colleges.

Personnel could request to attend training courses organized by other institutions. Directors would make the approval based on personal judgment. The expenses would be allocated to the traveling budgets rather than HRD budget. There is no budget for tuition fees or other fees to take courses in other places. Personnel had to seek and request for this on a case-by-case basis. Most of the time, they would go for practical knowledge training related to their jobs such as education assessment, handicraft, or computer courses. There was no attempt to promote or systematic assistant to personnel to seek appropriate courses to take.

Budgets of colleges must be approved by the Bureau. All periodic training courses organized by the central units were about procedural practices. The bureaucracy system requires a lot of rules and procedures, personnel must know all the rules such as memorandum writing, governmental document filing, etc. Personnel, especially in the administrative functions, were satisfied to learn such knowledge. However, most training budgets were allocated to personnel in the central unit rather than the development of personnel in the local colleges. As one personnel mentioned that *"those at the central office went to visit many institutions but knowledge learned could not be applied at the Bureau. They should rather send us because we could bring the knowledge back to improve our local colleges."* The result was that the personnel in the central unit collected necessary knowledge but those in the local colleges did not and sometimes they did not need the knowledge. This could be referred to as expert power base (French & Raven, 1960). It is likely that personnel in the central uses this strategy by learning more about the tasks and procedures hence they could influence the personnel in the rural areas. Those in the local colleges lacked sufficient knowledge for their works and had to rely on the center.

Many personnel, especially those in teaching function, wanted to pursue further study. However, this was hardly satisfied by the college. Due to the task structure of the college, degree classes were conducted during weekend while training courses were conducted during the week days. Personnel were scheduled to work seven days a week and took turn for weekly leave. They could hardly find continuous time for further study. They had to go on their own and managed their teaching schedules. Some directors assisted by rescheduled classes among personnel while some did not. Study leave was not applicable and scholarship was also not available. Those who wanted to further their study had to struggle on their own both regarding funds and time. It was very likely that they endured the condition because they wanted to keep their job while studying. Once they earned the degree, they might seek for a better

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job with their better qualifications. They are planning their own career rather than planned by the organization. The rules and regulations did not permit further study but the director had an important role in allowing for flexibility in the scheduling to allow personnel to arrange their time for further study.

It seems that the Bureau does not encompass modern HRD perspective to develop personnel. Most training offered by the Bureau was limited to basic skills training. This might be due to the fact that colleges were relatively new. The Bureau was opened in 2002 and the system might not be in place yet. Personnel, especially newcomers, had to learn the system in order to function correctly. The bureaucratic system was strongly evidenced. Trainings were offered to keep people under the rules and procedures rather than to promote development and changes. Actions for development were not supported. Directors had an important role in promoting learning among personnel. However, these directors were selected by the Bureau. The Bureau keeps close control over these directors as one of the directors said *"last year, I was called to the Bureau altogether 120 days."* The Bureau itself was governed by the CHE which operates under strong bureaucratic control. This was carried over to the supervision of community colleges. The objective of the government to release colleges from bureaucracy seems remote. The policy of the government seems preferable but people in the administrative positions still hold strong bureaucratic worldview. They were civil servants for decades before they came up the ladder to assume higher positions in CHE, ONESQA, and BCCA. It would be difficult to change these long-time veterans' bureaucratic perspectives. The aim to introduce flexibility into the government system is difficult to achieve. The HRD interventions were centralized either through budgetary control or centrally organized courses in spite of the aforementioned privatization of higher education institution attempt. Personnel who wanted to develop themselves were dissatisfied but those who were passive seemed to prefer the situation because they could learn the right procedures as against ambiguity found in the change process. Again, conforming to the right protocol would yield them peaceful lives in the bureaucracy.

The central authority should restructure the HRD practices to be more decentralized and respond to each locality's requirements. The need investigation or the first stage in the HRD process (Delahaye, 2005) should be performed carefully to realize true needs of personnel in the local colleges. Without this process, the directions for the development of personnel and the colleges are unaligned. Personnel in different college and localities have different needs for knowledge. Participations from personnel in the operation levels should be allowed when the Bureau plans for T&D rather than planned from the center that lacks information regarding the local conditions of each college.

It was found from the interview that the leaders, i.e. directors, have an important influence and role in creating flexibility and facilitating HRD of personnel. Leaders, with their authorities, can motivate personnel to learn and organize proper conditions that stimulate learning. They are able to devise budgets for necessary development and allow flexibility in timing for further study and other supporting structures. Leaders with visions realize the importance of development and stimulate the development process. They also can function as a liaison between the college and the

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Bureau and other institutions. Collaboration and networking with local business communities and other universities can create better opportunities for personnel's development.

Currently, some personnel in the colleges came to know personnel in other colleges through central training programs. These personnel created personal relationships and shared knowledge and information among themselves. This resulted in informal support groups among personnel who felt suppressed. Although the centralized training focused only in skills, the by-product of the process is the creation of networks among personnel that support sharing and learning.

In spite of the attempt to develop the HRM practices, community colleges were bounded by the bureaucratic umbrella. The recruitment, selection and compensation practices were beyond control of Community Colleges. Those processes were controlled tightly by the Bureau and Civil Service Act. Colleges could only play around with training and development though, as of the time of study, the practice was not really aligned with strategies but rather a transactional and short-term basis. The introduction of HR scorecard and Knowledge Management in several public organizations attained recognizable results (Office of Civil Service Commission, 2009). Key Performance Indicators suggested by Commission on Higher Education Commission (CHE), the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment (ONESQA) are good starting point whereby community colleges can create appropriate HR scorecard and Knowledge Management practices and manage the human resources in a more focused direction.

Conclusion

Community colleges are drawing Key Performance and Competency Indicators to improve the assessment process. Commission on Higher Education Commission, the Office for National Education Standards and Quality Assessment and the Office of Civil Service Commission provide lists of indicators for education institutions and governmental units. These indicators are used as tools to appraise all personnel in community colleges for the purpose of development, performance management and compensation systems.

The HRD process among community colleges in the northeastern part of Thailand was governed by strong bureaucratic perspective of the administrators. This research provides an evidence of leadership power both in positive and negative directions towards the management of organizations. The bureaucratic viewpoint is still very strong and hinders the human development process for organizational development. Before any development could be performed, the transformation of the administrators' perspective should be attempted first. The inclusion of other perspectives, either in the form of bottom-up communication or bringing in private sectors administration might introduce some changes in this perspective. It is strongly recommended that HRD intervention is needed at the central authority, the Bureau of Community College Administration. Future research should investigate a priori factors contributing to the bureaucratic perspective of the Bureau. Another interesting research project is an experiment for an implementation of a more appropriate HRD

intervention according to the HRD stages: need assessment, designing of the transfer of learning, implementation, and evaluation of results (Delahaye, 2005).

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