Restorative HR Practice: A Toolkit

May 2016

Restorative HR (RHR): A pioneering field of practice that brings together HR and OD with restorative justice to help people solve HR problems for themselves

#RestorativeHR @MayvinLtd on Twitter

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The story so far

When faced with an HR problem, rather than hiding behind the formal, policy-driven route, how would it be to move towards the difficult conversations and solve the issue before it went to lengthy (and often costly and draining) formal process? 'Confront the difficult whilst it is still easy' as the 2500 year-old Chinese book of changes 'Tao Te Ching' says.

Since 2014, Mayvin has been involved in a unique HR accredited development process, in partnership with Surrey County Council. Surrey's Youth Service was actively encouraging a restorative approach to its youth justice system, reducing the number of formal cases in the courts by 60%. They asked: how could we use this approach in other functions, such as HR? The essence of the practice is the same.

Restorative HR Practice has its roots in various branches of organisational work and support service practice, including mediation and conflict resolution, organisation development, HR Business Partner practice, and personal effectiveness. It focuses on developing an HR staff so that they can help to resolve issues more quickly and effectively than through a formal route, although the approach is proposed – not imposed – and there are always cases where it is not the right way forward.

The benefits for the practitioners include reduced workload and paperwork while staff and their managers feel better about themselves. Conflicts, disputes and disciplinary sessions between staff and employer are dealt with before the issue goes through a potentially lengthy and costly official process.

Thanks to using the Restorative HR approach Surrey County Council has reported:

- Performance is improved more effectively and sympathetically
- Motivation is on the up and formal grievances are down
- On average 15% of casework is resolved through HR restorative practice.

"We need staff capable of delivering essential services in the most cost-effective, efficient way, especially at a time when our budgets are under heavy strain from rising demand for services like adult social care and school places, and our restorative approach plays a big part in ensuring that's the case."
- *Denise Le Gal, Surrey CC's Cabinet Member for Business Services*

As part of Mayvin's work in the field of RHR we have produced this toolkit in order to help individuals and organisations begin their RHR journey. As the practice develops and we learn more about how RHR can help people, we will continue to share what we discover in our blog and future iterations of this toolkit.

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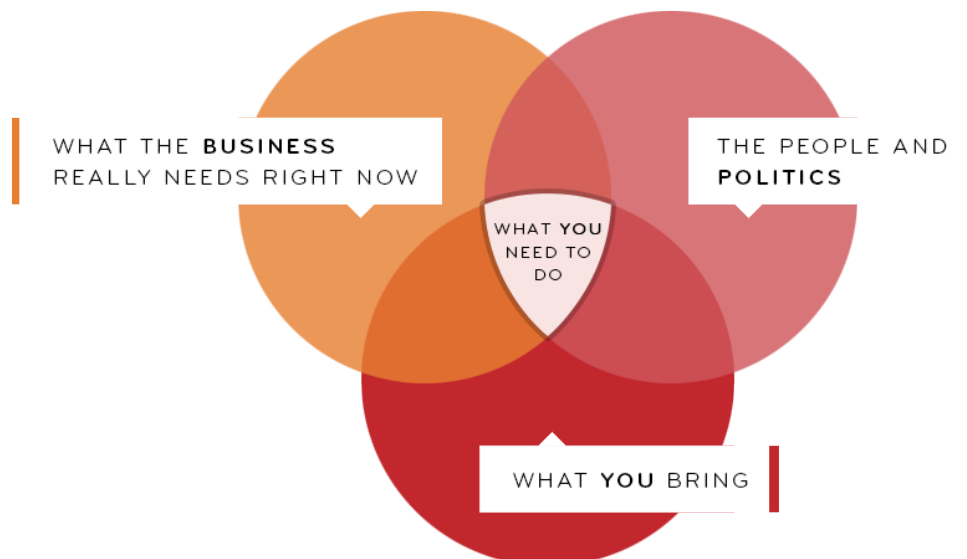
What is Restorative HR (RHR)?

Some of the ingredients of the practice of RHR

RHR is a pioneering field of practice. It has roots in various branches of organisational work and support service practice. This includes:

- Restorative Justice
- Mediation and conflict resolution
- Organisation Development
- HRBP Practice
- Personal Effectiveness

With RHR, you will be putting together your own ideas of what constitutes this practice, based on your own expertise and learning edge.

To this end, the following model may help you (discussed in further detail on page 18 of this toolkit):

WHAT THE **BUSINESS** REALLY NEEDS RIGHT NOW

THE PEOPLE AND **POLITICS**

WHAT **YOU** NEED TO DO

WHAT **YOU** BRING

The nature of this practice is in effect a meeting place of what the business needs from you right now, what are the key relationships (and their politics!) that impact on your work, and what choices you make for yourself and your own development as you go forward.

A Coaching Mindset

When an organisation is investing a lot of resources in a coaching culture at multiple levels of leadership, RHR can support this shift by encouraging people to solve problems for themselves, rather than relying on others to sort out challenging problems for them. In this way, at the core of the RHR way is a coaching mindset.

This gives you a range of flexibility about application of the principles of RHR – in effect, perhaps the choice between 'traditional' or 'everyday' HR practice and 'RHR', starts to blur when we explore some of the key principles of what RHR might be.

Below we offer some of these possible key principles. Each section ends with a question or statement to help you consider your own practice.

Some Possible Principles of RHR

Balancing systems and life-world
HR practice is usually within the context of recognised and often legally required systems of employment. Yet within these systems are the everyday relationships that need to be managed, developed, challenged and grown. Our work in RHR may hold the importance of these two in balance. We are invited to consider the formal and the informal management of relationships as equally important.

Think of a situation you face where there may be a gap of some kind between the formal and informal relationships amongst your clients

Confront the difficult whilst its still easy
How many big and intractable people-problems grow from small seeds of misunderstanding, poor communication, lack of taking responsibility and differences over what seem like insignificant details. These small things matter. Often, when we get our head up, we can see things coming, and they can be dealt with early.

What small differences could be dealt with now, if you helped others to take responsibility for them, before they become a bigger problem?

Inquire first (dig a bit)
Often we are tempted, particularly under time pressures, to respond to a presented problem, without questioning with people what underlying issues may be present. Our role may be to inquire first, to dig a bit, in order to help people solve their own problems, by helping them address the underlying assumptions.

Where might you currently be asked to 'solve a problem' when you could ask some more questions and get others to challenge underlying assumptions?

It's a mindset – 'always be restorative'

The more we live our lives as if every relationship has the potential to be improved the more it becomes an everyday habit, and you won't have to 'think' about it – you will just be in the groove.

With whom could you take some more time to improve relationships so they are better resourced to solve problems that may emerge in future?

Be self- Restorative

You too have the right for wellbeing, enjoyment and convivial relationships in your work and life. If you model this more for yourself, it helps to create a culture around you where everyone is doing it, on the front foot. This could also be a benefit in your personal as well as your professional life.

How can you develop better habits for yourself that restore your own wellbeing and effectiveness, or at least undermine it less?

Read the politics and relationships

Everyone does their work in a culture that has a range of dynamics of authority and power. This is both at a formal level (about ranks and roles) and an informal level (about personal and relational authority). Working with RHR is about actively owning and managing these formal and informal sources of authority for the sake of the greater good.

Consider what formal and informal authority you have, or can draw on, in the service of your work

Engage in fuller conversations

Although at first it may seem to take more time (and of course learning to do anything new can seem like that at first), the practice of RHR implies taking time to engage in fuller conversations, and going towards what might seem like difficult or awkward topics and situations, often taking an opportune moment to do so, but in a spirit of respect and inquiry.

Where are there uncomfortable or challenging topics of conversation that you or others may be avoiding at present that could be addressed together respectfully?

Founded on values, listening, taking responsibility, trust and respect

This is a practice that is founded on some of the fundamental values of an organisation, of *listening*, taking *responsibility*, building *trust* and embodying *respect*. RHR can also be an opportunity to put into practice such values. If we practice these, we are helping the organisation 'live its values, rather than laminating them'!

How far are these organisational values your own personal values, and what would you gain from living them more fully?

Give it a go – be 'good enough'
There is a danger with any new learning that we think we have to 'get it right' before we can do it for real. We are suggesting that RHR practice is only learnt by doing, and that means we need to give it a go, without thinking we need to perfect at it. Indeed there may be no such thing as the 'right' way, but it may be possible to practise being 'good enough'.

What is your own attitude to learning new things like RHR with others?

Altogether better
RHR is a practice in a context. It is not something that we need to do on our own but learn to do with others. We can do this in an atmosphere of building on what works, which means actively sharing ideas, examples and challenges in practice and developing together a better understanding. This is why we are working in an action learning way, being 'united in ignorance' as Reg Revans, one of the founders of the practice of action learning in the UK, used to say.

How will you support others as well as yourself in developing RHR practice together?

Why don't we know what the answer is?

When we are exploring RHR, we are entering a field of practice that is complex and challenging. The situations we are exploring may not have any easy answers. Indeed, there is no right or wrong answer to many of the most intractable problems that we face in our organisations. It is all a matter of perspective, and in order to work out a way forward, we need to be prepared to share these differing perspectives and work out a common understanding.

Professor Keith Grint of the Warwick Business School has a way of making sense of this that may be useful to us in the RHR arena. He explains why inquiry is more important than 'knowing the answer' in most organizational problems these days.
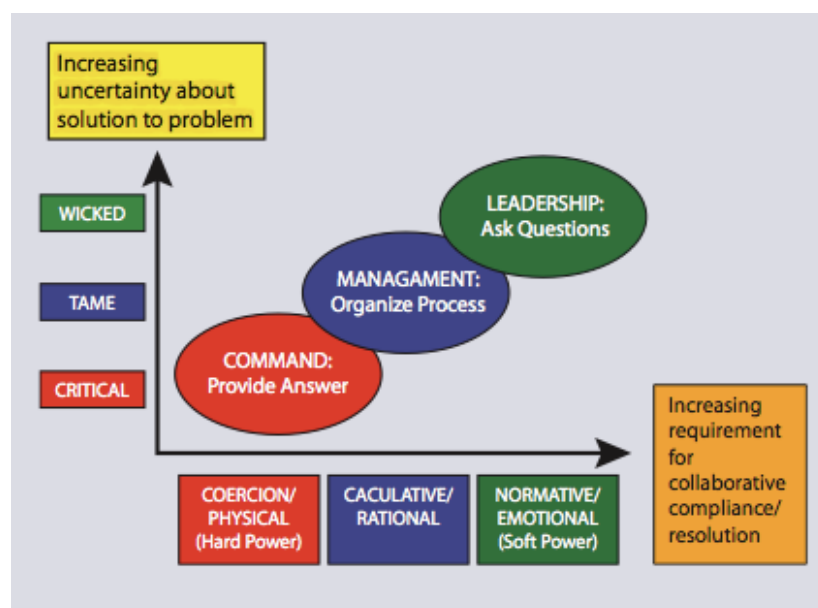
(From Grint, K. 2005 Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of 'leadership', in Human Relations Volume 58(11):

In this diagram, Grint maps the type of problems we face in organisations as:
- Critical: needing a clear chain of command
- Tame: needing a consistent management of the situation
- Wicked: requiring 'leadership' that inquires (ask questions)

In the RHR context, we can consider every situation we encounter as unique and therefore requiring an open mind, as well as an ability to inquire and explore in relationship with others a new way through. Our default position may be to try and manage the situation as if we know the solution, or worse still provide the answer to people, taking away their capacity to do this for themselves.

In RHR, the move is towards inquiry and away from providing the answer.

Where can we apply RHR?

In essence, we suggest that RHR is a *mindset*, a way of thinking about all of our practice that helps us makes some choices about being more effective – at one level we suggest we should 'always be restorative'.

There are of course lots of choices to be made, and when you are learning about a new skill- like how you can develop your own RHR practice- you might need to choose a particular situation where you can actively choose to move towards a more RHR way of doing things.

Here is a list of such situations in which you may consider applying your RHR skills:

- Conflicts, disputes, disciplinaries between staff and employer
- Difficult Behaviours or Personalities
- Assaults and Violent Situations in frontline services
- Efficiency
- Attendance management and disability
- Performance and Capability
- Personal & Emotional Wellbeing
- Domestic Abuse
- One to Ones, Performance and Appraisal
- Creating Positive Wellbeing Cultures
- Partnerships and Commercial
- Managing Team Dynamics
- Employee Relations
- Flexible working

Of course these are just some broad examples. As you develop your own practice, you will be able to refine an example of your own through which to explore the question for yourself: What is RHR?

Five Themes: A Framework for Restorative Practice

Theme 1: What's happened?

Everyone has a different perspective on any given experience or issue
Let everyone express how he or she personally experienced what has happened or is happening.

Theme 2: Thoughts and Feelings

Thoughts influence Feelings
Invite people to express what they were / are thinking and how they were / are feeling as a result of these thoughts.

Theme 3: Impact and harm

Conflict and wrongdoing impact on people and cause harm; this harm needs to be repaired
Invite each in turn to consider who has been or is being harmed / affected by the situation/event and how. Encourage accountability and responsibility.

Theme 4: What do people want?

In the event of harm everyone involved will have similar needs
Invite each in turn to consider what they need now to repair harm/solve the problem, to feel better and to move on.

Theme 5: The way forward

Those harmed/affected need to find ways forward for themselves
Invite each in turn to consider how each of the needs expressed can be met, what support they might need to do this and how they will do things differently in the future.

Restorative HR Practice: Emerging Themes

A blog by Mayvin

**Published on 28 April 2016 at **

On the 7th April we hosted our first Mayvin Community event of 2016: 'Restorative Practice – the new wave for HR?'. It was wonderful to see such a vibrant, inquiring OD community in the room as we discussed the possibilities that Restorative HR (RHR) presents.

During the evening some key themes emerged:

It works
The case studies and stories we heard and shared at the event show that a restorative approach really does work. At an individual level, it resonates with people; helping a relationship be repaired creates a sense of heartfelt pride. And it's not just an emotional response. A restorative approach can enable conflicts, disputes and disciplinaries to be dealt with before the issue goes through a potentially lengthy and costly official process.

We learned that at Surrey County Council, an average of 15% of casework is now resolved through restorative HR practice. Staff surveys and records show that HR practitioners have seen a reduced workload and paperwork while staff and their managers feel better about themselves.

Where there's a will there's a way

The consensus in the room was that, for a restorative approach to work, there has to be a genuine intent for it to do so, both from the individuals concerned, and those facilitating restorative conversations. It is also important that Senior Leaders are on board to watch the back of those taking a risk with a new approach to resolving challenging HR cases.

In order to appreciate difference and move towards the difficult, you need to be open to trying a new approach. You have to want to look for the common ground, to inquire together, and to remember why you may have enjoyed working with them in the first place. Being open to trying a restorative conversation, or suggesting one, is key to the success of this approach.

It's a challenging word

It was evident from the discussions in the room that the word 'restorative' is a challenging one. For the people who have used a restorative approach, the term has served them well. But by using 'restorative', are we admitting that something is broken? That can be a bold and uncomfortable move to make. Perhaps a more formal approach, such as an employment tribunal feels safer, more familiar, even though it is likely to be a more stressful intervention?

Yes, the word 'restorative' points to making a move toward the difficult, which at first can feel daunting, but it also underlines the fact that there is something there that is worth restoring rather than destroying. This approach is one of renewal, reimagining, reconnecting together.

You'll be remembered for it

Learning about a restorative approach and developing the skills to implement it is a massive take-away for your talent. Investing in an innovative RHR development programme will leave a legacy – a workforce that feels understood and cared for and, importantly, one where people feel they have a say in how they are treated. A culture of honesty, fairness and respect will be appreciated and remembered now, and in people's future careers.

At Mayvin we know that part of helping people to move to a restorative approach is equipping them with the tools that they need in order to 'have a go'. At the RHR event we shared the first iteration of the Restorative HR Toolkit. It could work for the highest performing, and most struggling organisations

At the event, it was recognised that Restorative HR may not be for everybody. It needs a compelling case and like most organisational development initiatives, best works when closely matched with a clear strategy. But for those businesses where a high performing culture is being fostered, or indeed where there is such a breakdown that a new and radical move 'towards the difficult' is required, it could be the difference that makes a difference.

More about the event and the toolkit
Taking place at Birkbeck College, University of London, the event hosted about 50 people, mostly Organisational Development and Learning Practitioners from a range of organisations across the public, private and third sectors, along with Mayvin associates and Friends. They were introduced to Restorative HR practice through a short presentation by James Traeger, Mayvin's Director of Practice, and Carmel Millar, formerly HR Director at Surrey County Council, where this move towards Restorative HR was pioneered.

A draft toolkit of Restorative HR was shared for people to take away. Then, as is the tradition at Mayvin community events, the main bulk of the time was spent with attendees having small group conversations with like-minded others, discussing an inquiry question, which in this case was 'how is this different to current HR work in my organisation'?

The participative spirit of these events is critical to the community building that Mayvin aims to foster. Refreshments are provided, which helps! People report that what impresses them most about these events is the interesting people you meet at them.

It's Time to Be Restorative in the Public Sector

A blog by Mayvin Director James Traeger

Published on 26 February 2016 at www.mayvin.co.uk/blog

Public sector organisations are in a crisis of exhaustion. They are beaten down by everlasting austerity and increasing complexity. How can we restore relationships and learning in order to support their earnest intent to offer real wellbeing and service quality to their employees and customers?

Restorative HR, a pioneering field of practice that brings together HR and Organisation Development (OD) with Restorative Justice, is the way forward for organisations. The essence of this innovative approach is the skilful practice of confronting the difficult while it's still easy in order to more artfully manage relationships and, in doing so, look after yourself as well.

The public sector has been the place where you could expect to find a learning culture. I personally learnt lots about leadership, service, diversity and equality, by my time working in local government in the 1990s. A colleague of mine, now retired, who plied his trade in Learning and Development in a County Council in the nineties and noughties, was one of my most innovative and reflective mentors, and part of a team who all seem to exude this spirit of learning.

But has a certain defensiveness crept in to the public sector? Like an organisational equivalent of shell-shock, a kind of reflex to 'hold on to what we've got'. Is there a wariness to be bold, innovative and open to learning?

If so, it makes sense. Senior leaders in say, local government or the NHS, face an arch set of complex problems, and with ever decreasing resources to deploy. This leads to stress, burnout, overwork, tunnel vision, in short all the things that dictate cautious outlook.

"I just don't have time to really reflect and learn', one senior health service manager put it to me recently. Yet there are more layers to this puzzle: add to this the infamous 'Daily Mail test'. As this same manager continued, 'and I can't look like I am taking the time to learn either'.

She continued: 'How does it look if I take time out from this hamster wheel of short term problem solving to 'reflect', god forbid at some nice pleasant hotel or conference? I could even be snapped and tweeted enjoying the desserts at the buffet lunch.'

The idea that learning is a luxury has been exacerbated by the current austerity context. But learning *is* the work; it is a necessity. The ever increasing complexity of organisational life means it is imperative that we find opportunities to do things differently, in ways that have never been done before.

Chris Agyris, the godfather of Organisational Development wrote a famous article in the Harvard Business Review in 1991 called '[teaching smart people how to learn](https://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn)[1]'. This basically sets out how 'defensive reasoning' works – why the most clever, senior people may be defended against the vulnerability and not knowing required for deeper learning to take place.

What this adds up to is that Agyris's proposition is:

- ▶ Even more true today than ever (for the above reasons)
- ▶ Particularly true at senior leadership levels, where the optics of reflection are problematic (being seen to be nose to the grindstone)
- ▶ And particularly in the public sector, where austerity has become the new normal

Take the recent example, of [the Environment Agency boss who was 'caught' staying on holiday](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35285020)[2] (at Christmas time, for heaven sake!) and forced to resign because he trusted his colleagues to be dealing with the flood disaster. It just looked bad.

It is time to restore the value of learning to these organisations, these big complex public sector systems that struggle with the complexity they face, on a shoestring. This means restoring relationships. The most valuable culture of learning is with, and through, each other and that demands a level of trust and therefore vulnerability at

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[1] https://hbr.org/1991/05/teaching-smart-people-how-to-learn
[2] http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-35285020

every level. At Mayvin we have developed the Restorative HR approach[3] as a way to do that, and we did so by working with a local authority that bucked this trend of defensiveness and caution.

The service profit chain[4] hasn't gone away – your internal culture of service will directly drive your external quality of service. If the relationships have broken down internally, and people have stopped learning, it is likely you have stopped listening and responding to your customers. This model is as true now as it always was.

Restorative practice is designed to work both boldy and carefully. The Daily Mail test isn't going to go away, so public sector organisations need a carefuly crafted but honest engagement to repair and restore pride and learning.

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[3] http://mayvin.co.uk/2015/11/25/restorative-hr-disrupting-the-old-story/
[4] https://hbr.org/2008/07/putting-the-service-profit-chain-to-work

Restorative HR: Disrupting the Old Story

A blog by Mayvin Directors James Traeger and Martin Saville

Published on 25 November 2015 at www.mayvin.co.uk/blog

Picture the scene: I was chatting with my nephew, a newly inducted graduate trainee in a global engineering company.

'I am not happy with the plans for my next placement', he says.
'Have you discussed this with HR?' I ask.
'Oh I don't bother with HR, they're useless.'
'Why do you say that?'
He pauses.
'I'm not sure; it's just what everyone says!'

I was shocked by this belief, this 'meme', that seemed to be floating around his company like a ghost. A moment's thoughtful reflection and he's bright enough to see through it, yet it seems to be a belief as pervasive as it is pernicious to the unreflective.

How would it be to disrupt this story about HR? Whilst there are loads of examples of excellent HR practice, what would it take to enhance its reputation as a profession; to create a new meme? This would be a more positive story, that HR is a vital source of practical solace and supportive good counsel; a useful, critical friend in hard times. How could we spread the view that this valuable and valued resource enhances the capacity of people like my nephew and their managers and leaders to solve their own problems? This is the vision of an initiative which has been developed by Surrey County Council, a UK local government body with whom we are working in partnership. The initiative is called 'Restorative HR'.

The origins of Restorative HR (or RHR) for Surrey County Council is in the thinking behind youth justice. Their youth service's practice of Restorative Justice was proving remarkably successful, reducing the number of formal cases going in front of the courts by 60%. Their simple yet brilliant idea was: how could we export this approach into other activities within the Council, such as HR? The essence of the practice is the same. When faced with a problem, rather than hiding behind the formal, policy-driven route, how would it be to move towards the difficult conversations and solve the issue before it went to lengthy (and often costly and draining) due process? 'Confront the difficult whilst it is still easy' as the 2500 year-old Chinese book of changes 'Tao Te Ching' says.

What this looks like in practice, and the development process we at Mayvin have created for it, is not rocket science. It is about an everyday craft, using a series of tools and skills you might recognise, springing from different roots in organisational and personal development, as well as restorative justice and conflict resolution. We have added our own, unique twist: a post-graduate accreditation process, to give the experience some containment and provide these practitioners, with a greater sense of confidence and credibility in their RHR work.

Surrey County Council has a growing canon of stories about good practice flowing from this approach:

▶ Tricky issues such as workplace alcoholism, bullying and other no go areas are being more sympathetically faced
▶ Persistent underperforming is being tackled both with more compassion and more assertively
▶ People are able to leave the organisation or change roles with dignity
▶ Engagement and motivation are on the up
▶ Fewer policies are being invoked so that people are freed up to use their initiative
▶ Formal grievances are down
▶ Beyond the everyday practices, RHR points to a change of culture and mindset, both within HR and in the wider organisation. Senior management have to be ready to back people going down the restorative route which inevitably involved some risk. It takes some guts to step away from the policy and towards the human side of the issue; leaders have to be prepared to model this too

Within Mayvin, we believe that RHR represents a big opportunity to disrupt the story about HR, helping it become a partner of the business with a reputation it deserves. It won't solve all ills, and ultimately people can't be made to take the restorative route. But as we often say to our RHR practitioners, if you don't try, you will never know if there was a better way.

By James Traeger

Martin Saville continues...

A couple of weeks ago I was telling the story of our work on 'Restorative HR' (RHR) to my friend Catherine Howe. She had recently been appointed to a senior position in Capita with a brief to drive innovation by championing 'Disruptive Technologies' within the organisation. It struck us that RHR was just such a 'Disruptive Technology' for HR. By shifting the emphasis from formal policies to brave conversations when things get difficult between people, RHR has the potential to fundamentally shift the way in which HR does what it does.

What might be the broader impact of this?

- As James Traeger shares above, we are already seeing better outcomes for individuals created through an approach that has more dignity, humanity and authenticity
- This has implications for HR practitioners, managers and leaders and more broadly for organisational culture
- It presents a way to enable organisations to 'live their values, not laminate them'
- Where the unions are embracing RHR it is forging a new and different partnership between the unions and the organisations whose employees they represent
- Grievances are coming down and the expectation is for days lost to absence to do likewise
- It offers the potential for HR's case load to reduce and to foster a less dependent relationship between HR and the organisation

In straitened times for the public sector, maybe RHR offers creative possibilities for genuinely doing more with less? James rightly warns about looking to RHR as a panacea to cure all ills. But consider that for our local authority client, Restorative Justice produced a 60% reduction in cases going through the youth courts. What could Restorative HR help organisations save by enabling them to have the right 'difficult' internal conversations?

Building OD Capability: from Theory into Practice

An article by Mayvin Director Martin Saville

The Problem OD practitioners face

Recent years have seen an increased focus in our UK client work on building OD capability in organisations. This specialised work can take a variety of forms, ranging from accredited OD capability programmes for HR Business Partners, to supervision, consultancy and advanced training and development for experienced OD teams. The more of this work we do, and no matter the sector, the more we notice similar concerns. These can be summarised by the following three questions:

▸ How can I talk about OD in a way that is simple, compelling and relevant to the rest of the organisation?
▸ What should I actually be doing on a day-to-day basis if I am to be a 'proper' OD practitioner?
▸ How can I get the necessary access, permission and authority to do the (often challenging) OD work that needs to be done?

OD theory seems to be of little use here. Standard definitions of OD are regarded as too abstract, too jargon-laden and too wordy to connect with task-focused managers with no reason to be interested. At the same time, the organisational models which we love to teach often point to things that are either too remote from practitioners' day jobs or too hot to handle politically.

Additionally, there are often other functions working the same organisational landscape, many with a more seductively tangible offer. Thus, Service Improvement teams reengineer business processes to make them LEAN; Business Transformation teams perform organisational restructures according to a project timeline. OD work, with its emphasis on intangibles, can seem woolly by comparison.

In response to these challenges, we seek to support our clients to develop a more tangible and compelling way of thinking about and communicating their OD agenda. At the heart of our approach are two key principles that can be summarised as:

▸ Local, Timely and Specific OD
▸ Separating thinking from communication

Local, Timely and Specific OD

OD work can look very different 'on the ground' depending on the context. OD is probably unique as a field in that it is not defined by a set of activities. This is why the standard 'universal' definitions of OD, while correct, struggle to explain what OD means in practice. We have found that a more useful approach is to encourage our clients to come up with an outcome and activity-based definition of OD that is right for their context, but less universally applicable. Thus a healthcare organisation may declare that 'OD is all about improving the patient experience through the Values work we are doing'.

This kind of definition, properly crafted, is more engaging and easier for people to grasp. Of course it is only relevant for a certain period of time and in that specific context, but our proposition is that a series of definitions such as this paint a clearer picture than the traditional universal definitions.

Separating thinking from communication

Our other key principle is that the precise terminology and language used should make sense to the audience at whom the definition is targeted. This requires the OD practitioner or team to consider who their key stakeholders are, what they care about and how to communicate with them as effectively as possible. This becomes a Communications job that is separate (though connected) to the Strategic Thinking job. We advise OD practitioners to make friends with their colleagues in Internal Comms.

Developing a realistic and practical OD agenda

One implication of the above is that coming up with a powerful 'definition of OD' that is fit for the context becomes OD work in its own right. In other words, before they can craft their definition of OD, the team needs to have developed the OD agenda, thought about its stakeholders and started to engage with them.

There is a lot of good material to be found on stakeholder engagement and our approach to this is not particularly special. We have, however, worked hard to find a way to create an OD agenda that is rigorous, realistic and responsive to the practical challenges our clients face. Our approach is based on thinking through the synergies and tensions between three distinct aspects of the OD context. We present these as three interlocking circles:

- What the business really needs right now
- The people and politics
- What you bring: the skills, capacities, values and aims of the OD team

In our experience, an OD agenda that is going to work in practice needs to take into account all three circles.
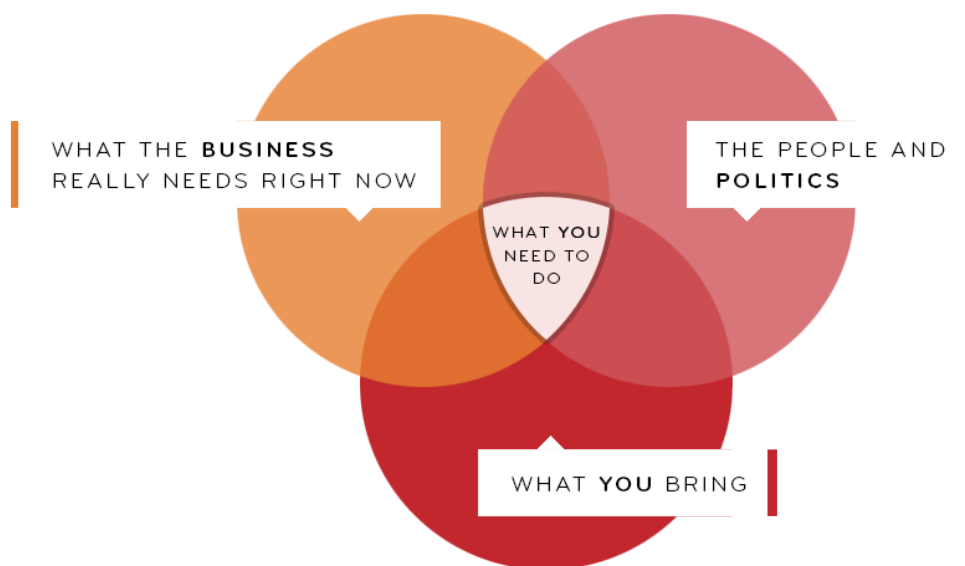
What the business really needs right now

This focuses on the formal aspects of the organisational diagnosis. Questions for this circle include:

- How is the business articulating its needs?
- Which organisational models does the team want to use to organise, direct and challenge its thinking?
- What kind of data should be collected, how and from whom?
- What is the diagnosis and what does this suggest about priorities for action?
- How much agreement and clarity is there around this?
- What would success look like?

The people and politics

While the Business Needs circle may come up with the 'right' answer, it doesn't take account of the political context. This can have an enormous impact on what is feasible, where to make a start and how to talk about the work.

Questions within the 'people and politics' circle include:

▸ Who are the key stakeholders and opinion leaders and what do they care about?
▸ How will they measure success?
▸ What are the key conflicts, no-go areas, clashes of interests?
▸ What permission is there to do powerful work and where are the doors firmly bolted?
▸ What is the OD team's reputation and who are the key allies?
▸ Who are the other players in the organisational landscape and how could they be enlisted or avoided?
▸ How much need is there for a team to be the 'organisational glue'?

What you (and your team) bring

The final circle considers what the OD team is actually capable of doing in terms of skills and experience, and also where their interests lie. It represents another aspect of making the OD agenda workable in practice, and also models the need for OD to 'do business' with the tension between individual needs and those of the organisation. It raises questions such as:

▸ What is OD team's skills set? What is it brilliant at, what it competent at and where are there development needs?
▸ How does this coincide with the kinds of skills that the business is going to need?
▸ Given the nature of the OD issues the business faces and the above, does it have the right kind of OD team in place?
▸ What does success look like to the OD team, according to its members' own values and passion?

In conclusion

We are not suggesting that the above model can be used mechanistically; in practice we find that thinking about each circle creates a different perspective on the other two so the three circles need to be thought about systemically and iteratively. (Where OD is concerned, how could it be otherwise?) What we do suggest is that by broadening the debate that an OD team has beyond the traditional organisational diagnosis, teams that are struggling for legitimacy or to get traction have a far greater chance of making a good start and of making a real difference in practice.

About Mayvin

Mayvin is a Leadership and Organisation Development consultancy founded in 2010. We are based in the South East of the UK and work globally across the public, private and third sectors.

Mayvin believes that today's organisations are inherently complex and challenging. We make organisations more successful, by helping them confront this complexity, take control and deliver lasting change.

We understand that the complexity of modern businesses is created by large numbers of human beings coming together, each with their particular needs, agendas, networks, outlooks and priorities. We know that it is relationships that drive results, and we have created an approach designed around the principle of building deep human connections to achieve outstanding organisational outcomes.

At Mayvin we have extensive practice and teaching experience. We are regularly called upon as faculty for some of the well-known providers in leadership and Organisation Development, such as Ashridge Hult and the NHS Leadership Academy. We teach at these institutions to Masters and Doctoral level. Our recent clients include the UK Civil Service, Guy's and St Thomas's NHS Foundation Trust, Plan International, Sodexo, Surrey County Council, King's College London, and Civil Service College Singapore.

Our team of experts helps our clients find new, innovative and effective solutions to their challenges. We stay focused on the benefits our approach brings to people in our client organisations, as well as to their customers, clients and stakeholders. We pride ourselves on our clients' successes.

Contact us

Tell us about your world, share your ideas or ask us a question. We'd love to hear from you! You can get in touch in the following ways:

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