Putting Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) into Practice: An Australian case study

Simon Fishwick: B Econ (Hons) Western Australia, M Sc (London), Grad Dip Bus Admin (SA Institute of Technology)

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The research associated with this thesis was approved by the Tasmanian Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee (H0009794).

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Simon Fishwick

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Simon Fishwick

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Date
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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of the Harvard Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) framework in 1984, there has been a significant volume of research on the link between the existence of HRM policies and organisational outcomes. However, there has been little development in terms of theoretical HRM models. There have also been calls for greater research into the mechanisms that link HRM policy and organisational outcomes. In particular, there is literature on the ‘what’ of SHRM but limited coverage of an integrated approach to ‘how’ SHRM can be effectively implemented.

This issue provides the research opportunity for this thesis. The study focuses the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) and its progress in developing a new HRM policy on managing performance that is centred on workplace feedback. A preliminary framework was developed based on the work of Guest (1987, 1997, 2002) that postulated four tests in a sequential approach to SHRM: linking HRM strategy to firm strategy (vertical fit); consistency across HRM policies (horizontal fit); effective implementation (managerial support) and outcomes (employee response).

The study was conducted as longitudinal embedded single case study with qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups gathered. Fifteen focus groups and seven individual interviews were held as part of the mid-trial review and evaluation of the workplace feedback trial. There were also thirteen key informant interviews held with executive managers, line managers and HR specialists over the period of the research.

In order to address the research opportunity, this thesis answers three research questions. The first question was: what are the relevant contextual issues for an organisation to consider in developing a new human resource policy? The answer to this question found a set of external
and internal contextual factors that influenced the TFS’s approach in developing and implementing workplace feedback. The study found that the organisation’s history, leadership style, and culture influenced the nature and manner of HRM policy development. The importance of maintaining a consistent approach was highlighted.

The second research question was: what are the challenges for the HR function in meeting the four tests drawn from the Guest framework? The answer to this question demonstrated the complexities and competing priorities for a HR function in seeking to achieve vertical and horizontal integration of HRM polices to achieve desired employee behavioural responses. Particular challenges identified included prioritising and sequencing of SHRM activities, obtaining consistency across HRM policies, the HR function maintaining credibility and visibility, and the importance of a consistent and sustained communication strategy.

The third research question was: how can an integrated SHRM process model assist a public sector organisation to design and progress towards implementation of a new HRM policy? The answer to this question indicated that the integrated SHRM process model can provide guidance on factors to be considered in developing a HRM policy in a dynamic environment. The longitudinal feature of the study contributed to the finding that the role of the HR function and its inter-relationships with executives, line managers and employees requires more prominence than SHRM theory has suggested.
# CONTENTS

TABLE OF FIGURES .............................................................................................................. xiv
TABLE OF TABLES ................................................................................................................ xiv
LIST OF APPENDICES ........................................................................................................... xiv
LIST OF ACRONYMS .............................................................................................................. xv

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION ............................................................................................ 1
1.1 OBJECTIVE OF THE CHAPTER ................................................................................. 2
1.2 RATIONALE FOR THE THESIS ................................................................................. 2
1.2.1 SHRM LITERATURE: LINKING HRM POLICY TO PERFORMANCE .................. 3
1.2.2 HRM POLICY DEVELOPMENT: USING AN INTEGRATED FRAMEWORK TO INFORM PRACTICE ................................................................................................. 4
1.3 BROAD RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY ..................................................................... 5
1.4 ORGANISATION OF THE THESIS ...................................................................... 6

CHAPTER 2. LITERATURE REVIEW .................................................................................. 8
2.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER .............................................................................. 9
2.2 STRATEGIC HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT ........................................... 10
2.2.1 A PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK (Guest’s ‘Four Tests of SHRM’) ............... 13
2.3 SHRM AND ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES .................................................. 17
2.3.1 ISSUES AND TENSIONS IN THE SHRM/ORGANISATIONAL OUTCOMES LITERATURE ............................................................................................................. 19
2.3.1.1 Correlation and causation ............................................................................. 19
2.3.1.2 Cross-sectional and single respondent studies ........................................... 20
2.3.1.3 Focus on firm performance as the level of analysis ........................................ 20
2.3.1.4 Insufficient attention to qualitative research .............................................. 21
2.3.1.5 Selection of performance outcomes .............................................................. 21
2.3.1.6 The impact of time-lags .............................................................................. 23
2.3.1.7 Low level of transfer from research to practice ........................................... 24
2.3.2 THE SO-CALLED BLACK BOX PROBLEM ..................................................... 24
2.3.3 THE CAUSAL MODEL OF EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE ............................ 26
2.3.4 SUMMARY OF SHRM AND PERFORMANCE LITERATURE ....................... 27
2.4 ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXTUAL FACTORS RELEVANT TO THE CASE ORGANISATION’S HRM STRATEGY ................................................................. 28
2.4.1 NATIONAL CULTURAL FACTORS ................................................................. 29
2.4.2 PUBLIC SECTOR AND SERVICE INDUSTRY CONTEXT ....................... 32
2.4.3 EMERGENCY SERVICES FOCUS ........................................................... 34
2.5 WORKPLACE FEEDBACK AND PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT .......... 35
2.6 THE ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION ........................................................... 39
2.6.1 ISSUES IN VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL FITt ....................................... 39
2.6.2 THE ULRICH FRAMEWORK ................................................................. 40
2.6.3 THE COMPETING VALUES FRAMEWORK ............................................. 45
2.6.4 HR’S RELATIONSHIP WITH SENIOR MANAGERS ................................ 47
2.6.5 CREDIBILITY OF THE HR FUNCTION .................................................. 48
2.7 THE ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS ............................................................... 49
2.8 EMPLOYEE RESPONSES ........................................................................... 52
2.8.1 EMPLOYEE COMMITMENT .................................................................... 53
2.8.2 ORGANISATIONAL CITIZENSHIP BEHAVIOUR (OCB) ......................... 54
2.8.3 EMPLOYEE ACCEPTANCE OF HRM PRACTICES ................................... 56
2.9 COMMUNICATING HRM PRACTICES ....................................................... 58
2.10 IMPLEMENTING SHRM ............................................................................ 59
2.11 SUMMARY OF THE LITERATURE ........................................................... 60
2.12 RESEARCH QUESTIONS .......................................................................... 63
2.13 CONCLUSIONS TO LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................ 64

CHAPTER 3. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY ................................. 65
3.1 OBJECTIVE OF THE CHAPTER ................................................................... 66
3.2 RATIONALE FOR THE RESEARCH DESIGN ............................................ 66
3.3 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY ................................................................. 68
3.3.1 ACCESS TO THE CASE STUDY ORGANISATION .................................... 69
3.4 THE CASE STUDY AS A RESEARCH METHOD ......................................... 70
3.4.1 THE PURPOSES OF CASE STUDY RESEARCH ...................................... 69
3.4.2 CRITICISMS OF THE CASE STUDY METHOD ....................................... 70
3.5 THE SUITABILITY OF THE CASE STUDY METHOD IN THIS INQUIRY ....... 77
3.5.1 THE LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................. 77
3.5.2 THE TFS AS A UNIQUE CASE STUDY ................................................ 78
3.5.3 SUMMARY OF THE SUITABILITY OF THE TFS AS A CASE STUDY ...... 79
3.6 CONDUCT OF THE RESEARCH ................................................................. 80
3.6.1 THE SELECTION OF THE CASE .......................................................... 80
CHAPTER 5. RESULTS PART 1: CONTEXT AND DEVELOPMENT ........................................ 143

5.1 OBJECTIVES OF THE CHAPTER ....................................................................... 146

5.2 NEED FOR THE TFS TO CHANGE ................................................................. 146

5.2.1 THE CULTURE OF THE TFS ....................................................................... 148

5.2.2 LEGACY OF 1980S PERFORMANCE APPRAISAL POLICY ......................... 150

5.2.3 FEEDBACK ABOUT A LACK OF POSITIVE FEEDBACK ........................... 151

5.2.4 STATE SERVICE COMMISSIONER’S DIRECTION (NOVEMBER 2002) .......... 153

5.3 DEVELOPMENT OF THE HR FUNCTION ...................................................... 154

5.4 IMPLICATIONS OF CULTURAL CHANGES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT .......................................................... 157

5.5 THE EMT AND DECISIONS ON WORKPLACE FEEDBACK ........................... 159

5.6 GENERAL ATTITUDES OF THE KEY ACTORS PRIOR TO THE TRIAL ........... 161

5.6.1 THE HR FUNCTION ...................................................................................... 161

5.6.2 SENIOR MANAGEMENT (EMT) .................................................................. 163

5.6.3 LINE MANAGERS ......................................................................................... 164

5.6.4 THE EMPLOYEES ........................................................................................ 165

5.7 LEADING UP TO THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL .............................. 166

5.8 CHAPTER SUMMARY ....................................................................................... 167

CHAPTER 6. RESULTS PART 2: THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL AND ITS EVALUATION .................................................................................................................. 168

6.1 INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES ............................................................. 169

6.2 THE MANAGEMENT OF THE TRIAL ............................................................... 170

6.3 THE PRE-TRIAL SURVEY .............................................................................. 171

6.3.1 CONTEXT OF THE SURVEY ...................................................................... 171

6.3.2 ANALYSIS OF THE DATA .......................................................................... 174

6.3.2.1 General views on Feedback .................................................................... 174

6.3.2.2 General views on TFS ......................................................................... 174

6.3.2.3 Experience with feedback in current position ....................................... 175

6.3.2.4 Expectations of the trial ....................................................................... 175

6.3.2.5 Concerns about the feedback trial ......................................................... 175

6.3.3 HOW THE RESULTS OF THE PRE-TRIAL SURVEY WERE USED ........... 176
6.4 THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW .................................................................................. 176
6.4.1 STRUCTURE OF THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW .................................................. 176
6.4.2 OVERALL RESULTS FROM THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW .............................. 177
6.4.3 FACTORS SUPPORTIVE OF THE TRIAL ...................................................... 177
6.4.4 FACTORS REQUIRING FURTHER CONSIDERATION OR DEVELOPMENT ................................................................................................. 179
6.4.5 SUMMARY OF THE MID-TRIAL REVIEW ..................................................... 184
6.5 POST-TRIAL EVALUATION ............................................................................. 184
6.5.1 HOW THE EVALUATION WAS CONDUCTED .............................................. 184
6.5.2 OVERALL RESULTS FROM THE POST-TRIAL EVALUATION .................. 185
6.5.3 POSITIVE FEATURES OF THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK TRIAL ............... 186
6.5.3.1 Structure & nature of training ............................................................................... 186
6.5.3.2 Simplicity & flexibility ......................................................................................... 187
6.5.3.3 Additional positive factors .................................................................................... 187
6.5.3.4 Overall positive impact of the feedback trial ........................................................ 188
6.5.4 NEGATIVE COMMENTS IN THE POST-TRIAL EVALUATION .................. 188
6.5.4.1 Initial negative response to training ................................................................. 188
6.5.4.2 Delays in conducting review sessions ............................................................... 189
6.5.4.3 Lack of follow up .............................................................................................. 190
6.5.4.4 Insufficient priority given .................................................................................... 191
6.5.5 THE EXTENT TO WHICH DIFFICULT ISSUES WERE DEALT WITH DURING THE TRIAL .......................................................................................... 191
6.5.6 OPERATIONAL MATTERS ........................................................................... 192
6.5.6.1 Scheduling, length & location of summary meetings ........................................... 192
6.5.6.2 Documentation (to facilitate meetings and to record outcomes) ....................... 193
6.5.6.3 Confidentiality and back-up systems .................................................................... 193
6.6 POST-TRIAL EVALUATION OVERALL COMMENTS .................................. 194
6.6.1 DEVELOPING A TFS SPECIFIC APPROACH TO WORKPLACE FEEDBACK .............................................................................................................. 194
6.6.2 THE DEVELOPMENT AND RUNNING OF THE TRIAL .............................. 195
6.6.3 PERIOD OF TIME TAKEN ................................................................................. 196
6.7 ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION ......................................................................... 197
6.8 ROLE OF THE EMT ............................................................................................ 198
6.9 ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS .......................................................................... 199
6.10 MOVING TOWARDS FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK .......................................................................................................... 200

6.10.1 COMMUNICATION OF TRIAL OUTCOMES ................................................. 200

6.10.2 WHAT SPECIFIC CHANGES OR ADDITIONS WOULD HELP IN IMPLEMENTING WORKPLACE FEEDBACK? .............................................. 202

6.10.3 WHAT ADDITIONAL INFORMATION SHOULD BE INCLUDED IN A PROCEDURE MANUAL AND LIST OF FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS (FAQs)? .......................................................................................... 203

6.10.4 RECOGNITION OF GOOD PERFORMANCE ............................................ 203

6.11 CHAPTER SUMMARY ............................................................................... 204

CHAPTER 7. RESULTS PART 3: TOWARDS TFS WIDE IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK ................................................................................ 206

7.1 INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES OF CHAPTER .................................. 207

7.2 ROLE OF THE HR FUNCTION ..................................................................... 208

7.3 ROLE OF THE EMT ...................................................................................... 213

7.4 ROLE OF LINE MANAGERS ......................................................................... 216

7.5 EMPLOYEE RESPONSES .............................................................................. 217

7.6 COMMUNICATION STRATEGY ...................................................................... 219

7.7 OVERALL APPROACH TAKEN BY THE TFS ............................................. 221

7.7.1 FLEXIBILITY OF APPROACH ..................................................................... 223

7.8 TOWARDS FULL IMPLEMENTATION OF WORKPLACE FEEDBACK .......... 224

7.8.1 EVALUATION OF THE WORKPLACE FEEDBACK APPROACH ............. 226

7.9 CHAPTER SUMMARY .................................................................................. 227

CHAPTER 8. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS .................................................... 229

8.1 INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES FOR THE CHAPTER ..................... 230

8.2 LITERATURE ISSUES AND CONTRIBUTION OF THE METHOD ............ 231

8.2.1 USE OF SHRM LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................... 231

8.2.2 CONTRIBUTION OF THE METHOD ......................................................... 232

8.3 RESEARCH QUESTION 1: CONTEXT .......................................................... 233

8.3.1 HISTORICAL CONTEXT AND ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE ............... 233

8.3.2 COMMENTS ON RESEARCH QUESTION 1 ............................................ 235

8.4 RESEARCH QUESTION 2: CHALLENGES FOR THE HR FUNCTION .... 236

8.4.1 VERTICAL AND HORIZONTAL FIR IN THEORY AND PRACTICE ....... 238