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## HRM: A Contributor to Employee Alienation?

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### ABSTRACT

In response to organisational demands for improved human performance, the Human Resource Management (HRM) literature has placed escalating emphasis on employee commitment. Despite this focus employee commitment has declined to a point where many workers are experiencing powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self estrangement, that are symptoms, which Blauner (1964) associated with alienation. Specific issues and challenges concerning alienation and commitment are explored in this paper. It is then argued that the predicament is not indicative of flawed HRM theory, but rather it results from the marginalisation of HRM which is caused by the failure, intentional or otherwise, of human resource professionals to implement the commitment focussed models proposed by Beer, et al. (1984) and others. These notions are discussed.

### INTRODUCTION

Although employee commitment is advanced as a key objective of contemporary human resource management (HRM), many HR policies and practices are having the opposite effect; that is, they are contributing to employee alienation. The 1980s were marked by the advent of a number of models which advocated a new approach to the management of the employment relationship and ushered in the change from 'personnel management' to 'human resource management' (Beer, Spector, Lawrence, Mills & Walton 1984, Walton 1985a, 1985b, Guest 1987a, Storey 1992). A consistent feature of these models was the obligation and duty of management to engender employee commitment to the organisation. Consequential benefits were presumed to accrue to all stakeholders: higher organisational performance, improved psychological and material rewards for workers and societal well being.

Whilst the models from this era promised to revitalise HRM practices, after 20 years it seems that few of these promises have been realised, with the result that many workers have become alienated. It is contended that this effect is in part because HR managers have been unable or unwilling to put into practice those actions which lead to a committed workforce. Theory and practice in HRM has the goal of achieving superior work performance, but not at all costs. Traditionally, HRM has taken the long term approach by seeking to improve working relationships in a climate of harmony and cooperation, and it is of concern that these values appear to have been overtaken by other imperatives, which are typified by short term perspectives driven, in the main, by economic objectives.

This begs the question as to whether there is a problem of alienation and commitment. Some recent

findings on the quality of work life in general, suggest that workers are reasonably satisfied (Bearfield 2003, Considine & Callus 2003, Watson, Buchanan, Campbell & Briggs 2003, Wooden & Warren 2004). However, the evidence is patchy at best. Watson, et al. (2003), for example, found that dissatisfaction was strongest in the following areas: stress work/family balance, job insecurity, boring work, career prospects and unfair pay; and Wooden (2000) describes how job insecurity, long working hours and earnings inequality all impact negatively on workers.

Of more concern in the context of the present paper is question of commitment and alienation. Crosby (2002) cites a study in which it was found that some young people preferred to be on the dole than face the humiliation encountered at some workplaces and he also refers to the AWIRS (Australian Workplace Industrial Relations Survey) survey of 1995, which indicated two thirds of workers could not trust, or did not know whether they could trust, their managers. On the connection between HRM and these matters, Guest (2002: 336) reports that managers "... fail to implement the sort of HRM that might engage the commitment of workers."

This paper examines how incongruence between contemporary discourse on commitment and demands for immediacy in HRM practices are generating employee alienation. It is constructed within the framework of critical theory (see, for example, Alvesson & Willmott 2003, Grey & Willmott 2005, Robbins & Barnwell 2006,) and concentrates upon the shortcomings and deficiencies of management in tackling issues of commitment and alienation. In doing so, it aligns with Robbins and Barnwell (2006) in sympathising with managers who face a difficult task in the current environment and it is, therefore, an aim to assist them in the process of managing others.

## HRM, COMMITMENT AND ALIENATION

Karen Legge (2005) distinguishes between attitudinal and behavioural commitment. She focuses on the more psychological form, in the context of discussing compliance and commitment, pointing out it is in fact an assumption that HRM policies give rise to desirable behaviours thus enhancing organisational performance. And she raises at least two questions: is there really a commitment/performance link and can a culture of commitment be managed? It is recognised that Guest (1992b) alerts others to the problem of conflating process and outcome in moving from psychological to behavioural commitment. Despite this contention the nexus between worker commitment and organisational performance is widely supported in the management literature, commitment being linked to individual effort (see, for example, Curry, Wakefield, Price & Muellen 1986, Guest 1987b, Randall 1987, Mathieu & Zajac 1990). It is not surprising, therefore, that much contemporary inquiry and practice in HRM is directed towards the development and maintenance of workplace environments which foster the commitment of workers to their employing organisations (Marchington, Goodman, Wilkinson & Ackers 1992, Millward, Bryson & Forth 2000). However, evidence suggests that employee commitment is deteriorating rather than improving (Kelly & Kelly 1991, Vandenberg & Self 1993, DeMeuse & Tornow 1996, Baruch 1998, Jurkiewicz 2000, Kalleberg 2001).

Etzioni (1969, 1975) holds that the degree of organisational involvement by workers is a continuum in which the opposite of commitment is alienation. He proposes that the continuum "... ranges from a highly intense negative zone through mild negative and mild positive zones to a highly positive zone." (Etzioni 1975: 9). He describes high positive intensity as 'moral involvement,' which is a deep internalisation of organisational values, goals and norms; in other words, commitment. His 'calculative involvement' represents neutral intensity, and is characterised by an exchange relationship between an individual and the organisation. Whereas 'alienative involvement' is an intense negative orientation in which individuals are forced to be an organisational member, but they do not identify with the notion of organisational linkage. This forced involvement is thus, compliance rather than commitment, an issue picked up by Legge (2005) in her discussion of HRM's attempt to move from employee compliance to commitment. Etzioni (1969: 65) further relates alienative involvement to "... the approach of prostitutes to transient clients.". While Etzioni's moral and calculative involvement have very clear parallels with elements of the models suggested by others, such as Kanter (1968); Salancik (1977); Mowday, Porter and Steers (1982);

and Meyer and Allen (1997), the tenets of alienative involvement are not considered in these approaches. Indeed, with the exception of Etzioni's work, research and literature on commitment virtually ignores the notion that employees may experience intense negative emotions about their organisation.

Given that the context of the present discussion is psychological, – rather than behavioural – commitment, alienation here is treated as a subjective, psychological experience (Blauner 1964), rather than Marx's notion of alienation as an objective reality (Bottomore & Rubel 1961, Taylor 1967, Fox 1974, Hyman 1975, Corlett 1988, Deery & Plowman 1991). As a state of mind, alienation is thus, by definition not inevitable under capitalism. Blauner (1964: 15-34) goes on to describe four dimensions of alienation:

- Powerlessness (due to being controlled by others in an impersonal system); the remedy is to increase autonomy and empowerment.
- Meaninglessness (from lacking a sense of how their own work contributes to the whole); the remedy is to ensure a sense of purposefulness.
- Isolation (no sense of belonging); remedied by giving a sense of belonging and identifying with the organisation.
- Self estrangement (detachment, no sense of identity or personal fulfilment): the remedy is to allow self expression.

The tragedy which alienated individuals feel at work embraces these four elements. The issue facing management is whether HRM contributes in a positive way to commitment or whether it exacerbates feelings of alienation.

## CONTEMPORARY BUSINESS STRATEGIES AND HRM

A key element of the model proposed by the Michigan group (Fombrun, Tichy & Devanna 1984) is the strategic view of HRM which entailed a strong connection between business strategies, organisational structures and HRM systems. However, research suggests that a number of current business practices have a negative impact on employee commitment despite management rhetoric to the contrary. The success of these strategies has only been possible with the collaboration and participation of HR managers. In this context, HRM is not so much the source of emerging business strategies, whether from increased competition or globalisation, as the handmaiden of their implementation. The point to be made is, as Guest (2002) emphasises, that ignoring the well being of workers can only result in their further alienation.

Promising lower overheads, more efficient communication, reduced bureaucracy and faster decision making, downsizing has been, since the late 1980s, a key organisational reaction to global competition, lower productivity and increasing labour costs (see, for example, Elmuti & Kathawala 1993, Applebaum, Delage, Labib & Gault 1997, Cummings & Worley 2001). Research, however, has generally failed to reveal a strong link between downsizing and profitability for the future. In fact, the opposite is not uncommon (see, for example, Drew 1994, Harrell-Cook & Ferris 1999). Downsizing consistently results in employees having lower levels of commitment (Noer 1993, Downs & Stogner 1995); a condition manifest in less willingness to accept change, increased secrecy and competitiveness (Newell & Lloyd 2002), a more transactional perception of the psychological contract, a focus on extrinsic motivators (Ebadan & Winstanley 1997, Martin, Staines & Pate 1998), and a general display of behaviours associated with 'survivor syndrome' (Brockner 1988, Boroson & Burgess 1992).

Referred to as "passive downsizing" (Bozionelos 2001: 3), hiring freezes are HR strategies which reduce an organisation's workforce by not engaging new employees as positions become vacant (Gómez-Meja, Balkin & Cardy 2004). Driven by funding cuts and privatisation, this practice has been particularly common throughout government agencies in many countries (see, for example,

Agnew & Foster 1991, Blutner & Holtgrewe 1999, Greenglass & Burke 2000, Yazzer 2002). In the corporate sector, the practice has been aimed at increasing market penetration, lifting productivity, improving workforce flexibility and more tightly linking HR planning to business cycles (see, for example, Toren & Nvo-Ingber 1989, Mishra & Mishra 1994, Bourdoux, et al. 1999, Kamoche 2003). In terms of employee commitment, hiring freezes seem to have negligible impact when used as a temporary solution, but when instituted for prolonged periods or 'overused', the effect seems to be similar to that described for downsizing (see, for example, Burke & Nelson 1997, Greenglass & Burke 2000, Bozionelos 2001). The literature suggests that, in many instances, hiring freezes are instituted often, and for long periods (Agnew & Foster 1991, Berkelman, Bryan, Osterholm, LeDuc & Hughes 1994, Mishra & Mishra 1994, Abowd, Lane & Prevost 2000).

Irrespective of the industry in which it operates, every organisation is affected, to some extent, by the prevailing technology. The adoption of sophisticated technology presents organisations with a HR choice. On one hand, advanced technology can result in the deskilling and task specialisation typical of the scientific management era. On the other hand, it can be the mainspring of skill development and quality management (Upton 1995, Youndt, Snell, Dean & Lepak 1996). The former is characterised by those employee role behaviours associated with cost reduction strategies: repetitive and predictable activities, short term focus, high concern for quantity, and low risk taking. The latter is characterised by employee role behaviours associated with innovation strategies: creative behaviour, longer term focus, moderate concern for quantity, and a greater degree of risk taking (Schuler & Jackson 1999). Although commitment can be significantly enhanced by the practices associated with innovation strategies (see, for example, Pinnington & Edwards 2000, Storey & Quintas 2001, Evans 2003), many organisations still rely on technology and systems which focus on cost reduction (Pruijt 1997, Wall & Parker 1998), and by extension, employee role behaviours which generate disaffection.

The traditional employment model of a 40 hour, Monday to Friday week has been progressively ceded to contingent patterns of work, which include casual and part time engagement (Rasell & Applebaum 1997, Allan, Brosnan & Walsh 1998, Murtough & Waite 2000). Approximately 30 per cent of Australian workers are now casually employed (see, for example, ABS 2000). For organisations, casual employment offers cheaper labour costs, ease of dismissal, ability to match labour time to workload fluctuations, and enhanced control (Campbell 2001). For employees, however, casual arrangements classify them as an inferior class of labour compared to permanent workers; their conditions being characterised by substandard rights, benefits and protection, plus substantial levels of precariousness (Burgess & Campbell 1998, Campbell 2000). In general, the management of casual labour emphasises cost reduction and monitoring rather than commitment, trust and development (Brosnan & Walsh 1996, Sheehan, Holland & Dowling 2002, Legge 2005).

Associated with the rise in the incidence of contingent employment is what Campbell (2001) refers to as a significant training deficit. That is, a marked discrepancy between the training afforded to permanent and non permanent employees (see, for example, Boreham, Lafferty, Roan & Whitehouse 1996, Wooden 2001, Lowry, Simon & Kimberley 2002, Combet 2003). Curtain (1996) estimated that 80 per cent of casual employees have fewer opportunities for training than permanent employees. In addition, Campbell (2001) as well as Hall, Bretherton and Buchanan (2000) argue that the training deficit is a result of employer attitudes. They contend that Australia's under investment in training for non permanent employees is born of a persistent focus on short term outcomes and cost minimisation, despite evidence that this mindset may result in skills shortages, poor planning, reduced commitment, and a decline in productivity.

Among the initiatives to improve numerical, functional and financial flexibility has been a significant increase in the use of outsourcing (Brewster, et al. 2000). Based on the core periphery model of employment, outsourcing involves the use of non organisational employees to execute activities which were previously undertaken in-house (Capelli 1999, Daley 2002). The anticipated advantages include: the liberation of expert staff from routine or non core work, the 'buying in' of expertise not available within the organisation, cost efficiency, no psychological contracts to honour, fewer problems associated with managing staff, less legal obligations, reduced union

power, and enhancing management prerogative (Purcell 1999, Punnington & Lafferty 2003). As Daley (2002: 20) notes, however, outsourcing "... can produce futile, short term benefits ..." by increasing the risk of diminished skill formation and loss of intellectual capital (Mabey, Salaman & Storey 1999), fostering inequitable pay and conditions, creating perceptions of job insecurity, and compromising data security (Punnington & Lafferty 2003). In this environment, employees' commitment to both the organisation and coworkers is degraded, and trust in management is negatively affected (James 1995, Baron & Kreps 1999, DeNisi & Griffin 2001).

Attempts to redesign work appear to have met with some success, but numerous commentators have raised questions as to their overall value and usefulness in the long term. Efforts to increase autonomy, participation and involvement in decisions, self managing teams and efforts generally to enrich jobs have yielded mixed outcomes. Programmes such as the 'quality of work life' movement of the 1970s, Total Quality Management, and present strategies involved with high performance work systems reveal conflicting evidence of their efficacy (see, for example, Blyton & Morris 1992, Harari 1993, Niven 1993, Claydon & Doyle 1996, Lawler 1996, Mullins 2005). A crucial issue is that of control. Are these initiatives really aimed at giving workers more control over their work situation, or are they best described as pseudo arrangements? (Edwards 1995, Willmott 1995, Mabey, et al. 1999). A continuing issue stems from the fact that managers, especially at lower levels, are often unwilling to relinquish control over subordinates. Hellriegel and Slocum (1978), and Delbridge, Turnbull and William 1992 as well as Sewell and Wilkinson (1992) report on a number of less obvious methods of control, including budgets, structure, policies, recruitment, training, reward/punishment systems and technology. And whilst the strategic initiatives are not new, and in many cases have not enjoyed entirely beneficial consequences, it is surely the role of HRM to minimise any negative affect on high commitment as a bulwark against alienation.

## THE UNRESOLVED ROLE OF HRM

Debate as to the meaning of HRM has persisted for over twenty years, due to inherent ambiguities and contradictions (Storey 2001). This debate focused on whether HRM should be seen as a system designed to develop employees (the 'soft' version) or, alternatively, to ensure full utilisation of employees (the 'hard' version) (Keenoy 1990, Storey 1992). The latter appearing to be a logical consequence of linking HRM systems as a strategic arm of top management (Fombrun, Tichy & Devanna 1984). Given the psychological consequences of alienation already described, a major question is whether HRM can really satisfy the needs of both the organisation and individual employees. The intention of the HRM model is that outcomes should be equally beneficial for the organisation and all individual employees. Certainly, the Beer, et al. (1984) model clearly suggests that the long term consequences of HRM include individual well being. At the same time, Ulrich (1997) argues that HRM needs to act as a champion of employee needs. Whether HRM has actually achieved such a desirable outcome is another matter of concern and is so far equivocal.

Several HRM strategies, whilst enhancing productivity and employee-organisational fit, can also be interpreted as covert mechanisms of control. The management of organisational culture provides an example of this position. Here, commitment and performance are manipulated by way of managing culture. Legge (2005) regards this as a shift from one of forced compliance to one of commitment, in the sense that employees identify with the organisation's goals and so to organisational success, achieved through influencing organisational culture. Legge (2001), also examined the evidence that culture management can deliver the double benefits of commitment and high performance, but finds that there are serious doubts about the validity of research which purports to demonstrate such an outcome. In particular, she notes the lack of longitudinal data which might support the HRM-performance linkage.

There are, however, differing views about culture. On the one hand the managerial view holds that culture is something organisations have thus, possessing an objective reality which managers can create and use. On the other hand, the social science view is that culture is merely a subjective reality and just is; meaning that, although it can be studied, the notion that it can be managed or manipulated is rejected. However, there is little doubt that organisations, via HRM actions, exert

considerable effort to influence, manage and change culture aimed at increasing organisational performance, creating an employee's perception of alignment between the 'inner self' and 'organisational self.' The fact that these efforts are at best only partially successful (Wood 1989, Guest 1992a, Salaman 2001, Legge 2005) bears out the point, that even if it is possible to influence culture, there are extreme difficulties in achieving the alignment mentioned. Extensive management research in areas of commitment, control and culture has, therefore, only met with limited success in terms of dealing with alienation. Indeed, Noon and Blyton (2002) speak of various ways employees survive alienation: making out (their informal regulation of work), fiddling, joking, sabotage and escaping.

Guest (2001: 111) observes that, "One of the important and persistent findings from research is the low adoption of 'high commitment' or progressive human resource practices..." and, in doing so, casts doubt on the efficacy of HRM. The questions raised earlier about the problematic issue of whether it is possible to change organisational culture – taking the managerial view – remain unanswered. A further matter concerns the much lauded swing away from collectivism to individualism under HRM (Purcell 1987, Storey & Bacon 1993). Whilst this shift might suit employers for a variety of reasons such as deunionisation and the striking of individual agreements, contrary to the rhetoric, it arguably serves only to reinforce the manager's power and control; it hardly fits with notions of joint consultation and stimulating identification with organisational culture.

Even selection and training can combine covertly in subtle ways to secure high commitment and culture change. This may occur at three levels. Firstly, by selecting those who express compatibility with ongoing organisational structural arrangements, operational procedures and institutional goals. Secondly, by exposing new appointees to induction/orientation processes, which is likely to inculcate them with the organisation's philosophies and beliefs. More subtle, however, is the third level, which embraces culture change for high commitment. Here, training strategies are directed to the construction or reconstruction of individuals so that they will commit to the organisation, that is to say, accept organisational values as their own and who define themselves in terms of the changing requirements of the organisation (Salaman 2001).

With its unitarist perspective, emphasising commitment, HRM deemphasises conflict (Storey 1992) to the point where it is attributed either to troublemakers or unwanted third parties interfering with the employer employee relationship. Further, Mabey, et al. (1998:41) specifically point out that HRM is "... based upon a consensus view of essential harmony" of employee/organisation relations. Thus, genuine conflict is not possible because there is a conjunction of interests between employer and employee. The pluralist view of personnel and industrial relations, on the other hand, regards conflict as not aberrant, but inevitable, due to incompatible objectives that reflect opposed class interests (Legge 2005). Thus, the position taken in this paper is that conflict should be managed rather than denied. The other significant characteristic of the unitarist HRM model is the strategic link between top management and practising HR managers. Therefore, here again, commitment is logically the vehicle for achieving management's goals, so that there is little scope for HR managers to represent the needs of workers. Indeed, any HR manager so doing would violate the strategic link between HRM and top management. In any event, in most cases, day-to-day HR functions are delegated to line managers, releasing HR managers to concentrate on strategy (Purcell 2001).

Notionally, at least, HRM with its unitarist underpinnings could have provided a solution to problems of organisational alienation and estrangement. It idealistically saw the natural state of employer-employee relations as one of agreement in which there was a confluence of interests. Clearly, this would have represented a return to situations in which employees no longer suffered feelings of isolation and could experience self expression and control over their work. However, the claims of HRM proponents that it can engineer such outcomes, together with its unitarist assumptions, have been questioned and criticised for a number of years and which now appear flawed (Guest & Hoque 1994, Guest 1999, Sisson 2001, Storey 2001, Legge 2005).

The 'soft' model of HRM (Storey 1987, Brosnan & Walsh 1996) recognises the imperatives of organisational results, but importance is attached to worker oriented outcomes such as quality of work life, employee well being and employee commitment (see, for example, Thornhill & Saunders 1998, Guest 1999, Worsfold 1999). Indeed, establishing and maintaining the commitment of workers is a fundamental constituent of soft HRM. Guest (1999:6) notes that "... only by winning the commitment of employees is it possible to achieve corporate goals.", while Sisson and Marginson (2003:167) believe "...securing the commitment of individual employees ... is at the heart of ... HRM."

The literature supporting the abovementioned practices argues that such approaches constitute high commitment, from which two common themes emerge. Firstly, there is a belief that commitment will result in behaviour which is largely self regulated (as opposed to behaviour which is controlled by external endorsements and restrictions); and secondly, that employees will repay trust and security with a strong emotional attachment to the organisation and its aims. It is disappointing that there is a lack of research evidence in support of these beliefs.

## THE PROBLEM WITH HRM

Although the body of literature advocating commitment centred HRM is generally authoritative, long standing, and convincing, it appears that many organisations ignore the principles of such a model. Contrary to the academic rhetoric concerning the pursuit of committed workforces, the connection between workers and organisations is being destroyed. In further contradiction to academic rhetoric, contemporary HR practice emphasises the important business role of the symbiotic relationship between HR and top management (Donaldson 2007a, 2007b, 2007c). An obvious question is whether HR can really satisfy management whilst simultaneously dealing with employees particularly in the sense of Ulrich's (1997) 'employee champion'. In the pursuit of competitive advantage, organisations continue to imitate each other (DiMaggio & Powell 1983) by adopting short term practices to solve long term issues, even in the face of evidence which indicates that such policies deliver very little benefit.

There are contradictions in the management of employee commitment, and hence, in the management of human resources. At an abstract level, the literature espouses the corporate and individual advantages arising from a high commitment and high trust environment provided by 'soft' HRM. In practice, however, the unremitting shift towards 'hard' HRM appears to be a primary cause of employee disassociation with the organisation. By seeking competitive advantage through downsizing, hiring freezes, cost reducing technology, casualisation, insufficient training, and outsourcing, organisations regard employees as a variable factor of production to be utilised with maximum economic efficiency.

The normative HRM assumption that worker commitment is natural to the employment relationship can only hold so long as it operates in a context of relative consensus, job security and stability (Price 2004). Yet HRM is not generating such an environment. To the contrary, HRM, driven by economic and business imperatives, attempts to secure commitment through managerial interventions and discontinuous working arrangements (Fowler 1987, Price 2004). HRM is perhaps unconsciously fostering a milieu in which "...individuals are forced to be an organisational member, but they do not identify with it." (Etzioni 1975:9); that is, alienative involvement.

It is simplistic to lay the problems of alienation at the foot of HRM; although this may be convenient, it rests on questionable assumptions. An integral and necessary condition of HRM is the part it is presumed to play in major decisions at the top level in organisations. Beer, et al. (1984) alluded to this in arguing that HRM should maximise outcomes for all stakeholders, but more specifically the Michigan group (Fombrun, Tichy & Devanna 1984) developed the idea HRM has a role in formulating business strategies. Clearly, soft HRM could flounder without such a strategic acceptance by top management. The role and requirement of human resource managers to implement long term strategies for a committed workforce with all its unitarist underpinnings (Guest 1987a, Storey 1992) can, therefore, only happen if, and only if, these managers have

sufficient influence with top management. This notion of having sufficient influence at the top may be flawed. In the first place, the HR manager's voice is, but one and can be easily put to one side by a chief executive and/or a board of management. In the second place, and perhaps more to the point, given the pressures of globalisation and market forces operating in a competitive economic environment, the 'niceties' of HRM in its pure form may simply be untenable. There can be no doubt that the body of literature since the 1950s has identified a multiplicity of managerial techniques which could successfully be applied to relieve the problem of alienation. It seems unfair, therefore, to lay the blame for this chronic disorder at HRM itself. In other words, it is not the case that HR managers do not have access to the knowledge gained from long standing research. Rather, the reality is that other, higher level organisational constraints, restricts these managers. Further research, aimed at discovering the actual level of their input tolerated by top management, is proposed in our ongoing research programme.

Given that alienation in the present context is defined as feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation, and self estrangement, the issue is whether HRM has overcome these negative feelings. Whilst it is recognised that contemporary management, in theory at least, presumably attempts to overcome feelings of powerlessness, meaninglessness, isolation and self estrangement, without radical changes to the way organisations manage human resources it may not be possible to rectify these problems. After some twenty years of HRM practice the evidence strongly suggests that workers of today are more alienated than committed.

## CONCLUSION

Etzioni's moral and calculative involvement corresponds with aspects of the models of Kanter (1968), Salanick (1977), Mowday, et al. (1982) as well as Meyer and Allen (1997). Yet these models are not concerned with alienative involvement identified by Etzioni (1969, 1975). A similar phenomenon is evident in HRM policies and practices. The methods by which 'soft' HRM gains employee commitment focus on Etzioni's moral involvement (deep internalisation of organisational values, goals and norms) and/or calculative involvement (exchanges between the employee and the organisation), but the nexus between 'hard' HRM and alienative involvement cannot be overlooked.

The feelings of powerlessness, isolation and loss of self identity which result from alienation should not be ignored, as this sense of meaninglessness depletes the worker commitment which is essential for high organisational performance. Whilst various contemporary HRM models are capable of alleviating the symptoms, organisational focus on short term, quantifiable strategies has neutralised HRM's efforts. By leaving social needs unmet through its emphasis on individualism and making unitary assumptions about the goals and interests of workers, this approach seems particularly at odds in pluralistic societies and the current emphasis in management circles on diversity.

HRM in practice has been unable to deal with alienation, which subverts workers from their inner or true selves by overt or covert means, particularly through seeking to establish a culture of commitment. In fact, it seems to be the case that HR practitioners may well have contributed to alienation. The classic problems of alienation refuse to go away because the nature of the employer/ employee relationship under the unitarist and strategic form of HRM is logically not possible to alter. This is not to deny that the rhetoric of HRM seeks to achieve outcomes which would bring with it individual well being, organisational effectiveness and societal well being (Beer, et al. 1984). However, the point remains that the unitarist HRM model, as applied, has serious shortcomings in purporting to help generate commitment; indeed, this paper argues that feelings of alienation are exacerbated due to the dysfunctional consequences of HR practices.

The central thesis advanced here is that the problem lies not so much with the theory of HRM – at least in the 'soft' version – but with practitioners of HRM who have had a pivotal role in the implementation and delivery of business strategies, which have alienated workers. Such participation may not have been willing. Indeed, many HR professionals may recognise the decline



in commitment attendant to these practices but have been coerced by higher ranked executives. The outcomes are the same, however – alienated, and, therefore, less effective employees.

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