

Orchestrating an organizational mastery climate: Lessons from human resource managers

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About the author

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Abstract

This study aims to explore how HR professionals orchestrate an organizational mastery climate (i.e., a climate that fosters employees' effort and cooperation in learning, development and skill mastery) in their organizations. Theoretically, the study builds on HR systems theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) and the literature on HR alignment. The study is informed by thirty-four in-depth interviews with senior HR leaders in Indonesia from multiple industries and scale of businesses. Several themes emerged from the thematic analysis of the data, accentuating the alignment between the HR function, the employees and the senior management team. These themes are found to be critical to achieve the synergistic effects of HR practices in order to establish organizational mastery climate. Theoretically, this study contributes to the expansion of the strategic human resource management (HRM) body of knowledge by highlighting (1) the crucial role the HR function plays in establishing organizational mastery climate; and (2) the importance of aligning HR practices with key stakeholder interests to establish an organizational mastery climate. The study provides a practical model and a checklist for people management professionals for creating and maintaining a strong and unified organizational learning climate.

Keywords: HR professionals, HR practice alignment, HR systems theory, organizational mastery climate

Introduction

In the face of rapid industrial, technological and economic change, human resource development, upskilling and re-skilling are essential for individual and organizational performance (CIPD, 2020). Organizational climates, i.e., employees' shared understanding of norms, values and accepted behaviours, can be crucial for driving such learning and development (Hadiono, 2021). Indeed, organizational mastery climates emphasize employee learning, collaboration and positive relationships as a means to achieve performance (Dragoni, 2005). In organizational mastery climates, employees are encouraged to openly share information (including their failures) (Poortvliet et al., 2009). Organizational mastery climates provide employees with opportunities to innovate and make mistakes (De Meuse et al., 2010) and encouragement to take risks, be flexible, consider different points of view, raise questions and seek feedback (Detert & Edmondson, 2011). Organizational mastery climate has been found to be associated with positive work-related outcomes including employee intrinsic motivation, workplace performance, adaptive work behaviours, learning enjoyment and well-being, engagement, task perseverance and persistence in the face of difficulty (Černe et al., 2017; Van De Pol et al., 2012).

There is evidence that people management approaches are instrumental to building and maintaining organizational climates relevant for fostering learning and development, e.g., organizational learning orientation climate (Ning et al., 2018), creativity climate (Heffernan et al., 2015), human resource development climate (Muduli, 2015), developmental climate (Wei et al., 2011) and organizational learning climate (Mirzapour et al., 2019). Extant research on organizational climate revolves around understanding the impact of human resource practices on employees' perceptions (e.g., Chow & Liu, 2009; Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004). Yet, our understanding of how organizational climate may be established through people management is at best described as a 'black box' (Boxall & Purcell, 2016): we know the inputs (i.e., people management practices) and the outputs (i.e., organizational climate and individual and organizational performance) but not exactly how the inputs are translated into outputs. To address the 'how' of the human resource management-performance black box, there are ongoing theoretical and practical debates concerning (1) which HR practices matter and (2) the mechanisms through which HR practices translate into organizational climates (Posthuma et al., 2013). Inspired by these debates, this research explores how HR professionals orchestrate the process that establishes organizational mastery climates.

Managers and HR professionals are recognised as key stakeholders in how HR strategy is implemented in practice and experienced by employees (Wright & Nishii, 2006), and for establishing organizational climates (Ott & Baksh, 2005). Direct line managers are crucial in implementing people management strategy (Hewett et al., 2024). At the strategic management level, the presence of an overarching organizational philosophy (i.e., in terms of a mission statement and HR strategy) has been found to be supportive of the establishment of mastery climate (Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004). Senior management role modelling of the desired values and behaviours enables employees to learn to trust management sufficiently in order to initiate learning experimentation; even when such behaviour bears a risk of failure (Nerstad et al., 2018). The role the HR professionals play is relatively less straightforward, as they are positioned between senior management and line managers (Edgley-Pyshorn & Huisman, 2011) in the implementation of strategy and influencing desired employee behaviours. While HR's role in establishing organizational climate is acknowledged (Ott & Baksh, 2005), how HR professionals achieve this is not well understood (Trullen et al., 2016). This research aimed to address the question of how HR professionals orchestrate an organizational mastery climate, that is the creation of shared meaning and understanding supporting employee learning goals. This investigation is based on Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) HR systems strength model. This model emphasises the signalling value of HR practices in guiding employee values and expectations. Considering that the HR professionals are not often in direct contact with employees in an organisation, such signalling becomes crucial for translating strategic aims into employee behaviours.

An HR systems strength approach to establishing organizational climate

According to HR systems strength theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; Ostroff & Bowen, 2016), organizations send signals to employees about what is valued and rewarded through HR practices. Yet, these signals are often interpreted in idiosyncratic ways by employees and managers. The theory offers three key mechanisms through which individuals form causal attributions that inform the creation of an unambiguous and shared understanding of strategic HR messages among employees. Positive attributions result when information about HR practices is distinctive (observed by everyone), consistent (the same across time and facets) and consensual (agreed by everyone):

- Distinctive messages are visible and understandable HR practices that are relevant to organizational and employee goals and motivations.
- Consistent messages show cause–effect relationships between HR practices and expected behaviours and outcomes, and are communicated invariably across all employees.
- Consensual messages demonstrate agreement on the fairness of the process and the content of the message between the sender and the receiver.

These mechanisms determine the strength of the HR system in an organisation (Ostroff & Bowen, 2016). Accordingly, to the extent that HR practices are communicated to the employees in a distinctive, consistent and consensual manner, employees will share a common understanding of organizational values and expectations. This is substantiated through shared employee perceptions, attributions and work–related attitudes and behaviours (Colakoglu et al., 2022; Meier–Barthold et al., 2023). Moreover, HR system strength has also been shown to impact the perceived effectiveness of the HR function and HR professionals, thereby increasing the clarity and acceptance of the performance–related signals and messages communicated by HR (De Winne et al., 2013).

Human resource management practices that are aligned with organizational goals communicate strong HR messages (Subramony, 2009). The overall distinctiveness, consistency and consensus of organizational HR messages requires some degree of internal fit/alignment between HR practices that are geared towards establishing the mastery environment (Perez Lopez et al., 2005). In fact, alignment within HR practices has been found to be critical in creating a high trust and high performing work climate that impacts employees' level of commitment (Appelbaum et al., 2000; Pfeffer, 1998). This type of internal fit within HR practices is also referred to as horizontal alignment of HR practices (Han et al., 2019).

Beside alignment between HR practices, it is also argued that the HR function itself should be vertically aligned with organizational strategy and other organizational functions (e.g., Harrison & Bazy, 2017; Herd et al., 2018). Specifically, vertical alignment is about the alignment between the different levels of the HR function's architecture: Principles (strategies), Policies, Procedures (practices) and Products (outcomes) within the wider organizational strategy (Posthuma et al., 2013). Employees report a more positive psychological climate and believe that learning and mastery is valued and rewarded, if they can understand how HR practices are tied with organizational goals

and strategy (Herd et al., 2018). Particularly when HR practices are co-created with input from key stakeholders, e.g., senior management and organizational functions, employees are better able to understand how HR practices align with changing organizational and personal goals (Kaufmann et al., 2020). In sum, combining HR system strength theory with these notions of alignment, this paper explores how HR professionals work with organizational stakeholders to align HR signals and orchestrate an organizational mastery climate.

Method

A qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews was adopted due to the exploratory nature of the study. The flexibility afforded by semi-structured interviews was important for this study, as it allowed the exploration of a vast array of topics around HR practices, learning behaviour and climate within a complex organizational environment. The interviews provided rich insights into the complex environments faced by senior HR leaders.

The interviews were conducted face-to-face, immediately prior to the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak in 2020, and lasted for approximately an hour, on average. A non-probability, purposive convenience sampling strategy was adopted, through the researcher's professional network of HR managers in Indonesia. This sampling strategy allowed focusing on participants who are most likely to experience, know about or have insights into the workings of the HR function. The sampling decisions were guided by the principle of theoretical saturation: The required data was collected until no new insights were generated and each concept was fully explored.

The interview schedule was derived based on existing literature and consisted of five open-ended questions:

- 1 From your perspective as an HR leader, what kind of employee learning behaviour(s) are expected and rewarded in your organization?
- 2 How would you describe your organization's learning climate?
- 3 Focusing on the HR practices conducted in your organization, what do you think would be the practices to establish an organizational climate conducive to employee learning behaviour(s)?
- 4 Taking into account all HR practices you have mentioned before, how do you combine and ensure alignment of these practices?

5 Finally, let's discuss implementation. How do you ensure such HR strategies are implemented in practice and experienced by the employees?

Table 1 provides sample characteristics. The sample consisted of 34 senior HR leaders in Indonesia from multiple industries and scale of businesses. Their roles involved Regional Head of HR, Chief/Country HR Officer and functional-level HR Managers (such as Recruitment, Employee and Organizational Development, Talent Management, Reward and Internal Communication Managers). Participants came from fifteen different industries.

Table 1
Sample characteristics (N=34)

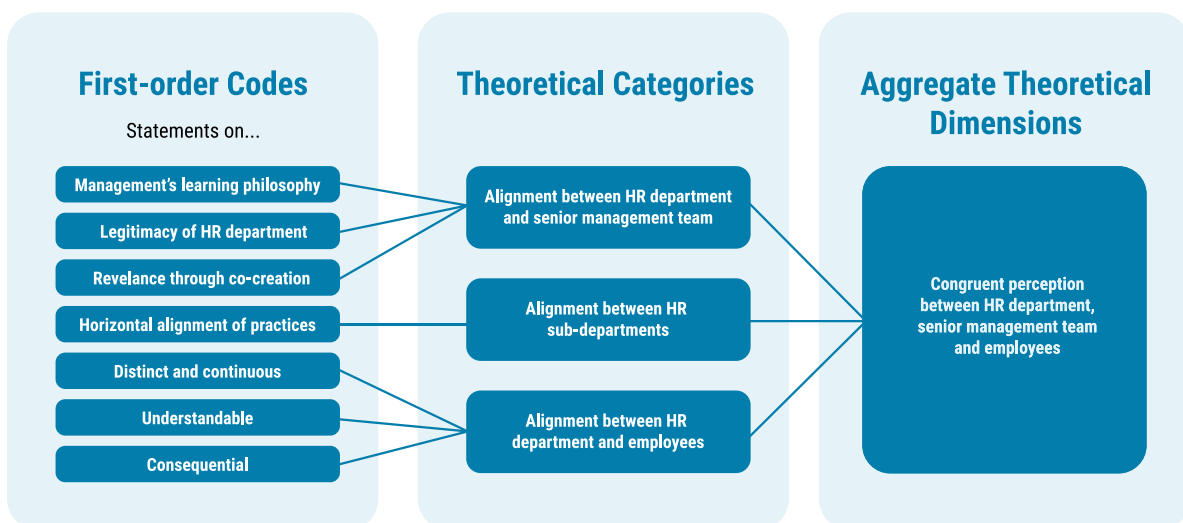
Participant Code	Generic Job Title	Industry	Scale of Business (Number of Employees)
Participant 01	Chief HR Officer	Banking	±25,000
Participant 02	HRBP Manager	Banking	±25,000
Participant 03	HR System Manager	Banking	±25,000
Participant 04	Chief Operation Officer	Consultancy	±100
Participant 05	Chief Executive Officer	Consultancy	±100
Participant 06	Chief HR Officer	E-commerce	±5,000
Participant 07	HRBP Manager	E-commerce	±5,000
Participant 08	Training Manager	E-commerce	±5,000
Participant 09	Training Manager	E-commerce	±5,000
Participant 10	Chief HR Officer	Education	±300
Participant 11	Chief HR Officer	Financing Service	±3,000
Participant 12	Chief HR Officer	Financing Service	±11,000
Participant 13	Talent Manager	Financing Service	±11,000
Participant 14	Training Manager	Food and Beverages	±2,000
Participant 15	Org. Devt. Manager	Food and Beverages	±2,000
Participant 16	Recruitment Manager	Food and Beverages	±2,000
Participant 17	Chief HR Officer	Food and Beverages	±2,000
Participant 18	Chief HR Officer	Carpentry	±2,000
Participant 19	Chief HR Officer	Media - Electronic	±21,000
Participant 20	Chief HR Officer	Media - Traditional	±21,000
Participant 21	Chief HR Officer	Oil and Gas	±200
Participant 22	HRBP Manager	Oil and Gas	±200
Participant 23	Chief HR Officer	Pharmaceutical	±12,000
Participant 24	Chief HR Officer	Plant Breeding	±1,000
Participant 25	HRBP Manager	Plant Breeding	±1,000
Participant 26	Training Manager	Plant Breeding	±1,000
Participant 27	HR Advisor	Property Development	±500
Participant 28	Training Manager	Property Development	±500
Participant 29	HRBP Manager	Property Development	±500
Participant 30	Chief HR Officer	Public Service	±100
Participant 31	Chief HR Officer	Transportation	±4,000
Participant 32	Talent Manager	Transportation	±4,000
Participant 33	HR Manager	University	±300
Participant 34	College Dean	University	±500

An inductive thematic approach was adopted for data analysis. This approach involves ‘chunking’ the collected data into meaningful and related categories, to be further rearranged and analysed systematically for patterns. Written transcripts were produced for all interviews. Based on these transcripts, initial summaries and key quotes were noted down. Corroborated by the literature review, these summaries allowed key themes to be identified (open coding). In relation to these themes, sections of the interviews were then categorised. After being rearranged according to the categories, final summaries were established. NVIVO program (a qualitative data analysis computer software package) was used for this coding; followed by axial and selective coding. This involved exploring underlying relationships or patterns and identifying new themes or categories (if there were any). This analysis was then tested by seeking examples to negate them or for alternative explanations. Finally, the themes that emerged from data were linked back to the literature review.

Findings

Three main themes emerged from the data, all of which revolve around alignment between different organizational constituents (see Figure 1). When asked how HR helps facilitate the establishment of a mastery climate, senior HR managers in this study primarily referred to alignment between (1) the HR function and the senior management team; (2) HR sub-functions and (3) the HR function and the employees.

Figure 1
Summary of findings



Alignment between the HR function and the senior management team

Participants mentioned that the establishment of a mastery climate calls for strong alignment between the HR function and the senior management team. It was suggested that achieving a unified mastery climate needs to be firmly rooted in the senior management team's own philosophy or belief on the importance of learning. This belief is deemed critical as it supports senior management's adoption, as well as the communication of the practices. Excerpts below are illustrative of how HR professionals view the role of alignment in creating consensus across the organization on the importance of learning and mastery:

“We need to have the same mindset and this can be built through role modelling of our top leaders. Ever since the conception of our company, our founders have already been focusing on learning. We already have a Management Trainee programme since the 1980s as they knew that in the future, the organization needs to grow leaders from within. There is continuous attention to this mindset within our coaching philosophy.” (Participant 01)

“[I believe that our] climate is like "monkey see monkey do." If people see their leaders are decisive, everyone will do the same thing. Hence, I am currently focusing on the leaders.” (Participant 09)

The second set of statements is about the role the senior management team plays in diffusing these HR practices into the rest of the organization and thereby increasing the legitimacy of the HR function at the same time. HR legitimacy refers to employees' perception of the credibility and status levels of the HR practices, systems, functions or agents, and is an indicator of the distinctiveness of the messages signalled by the HR function (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004). Participants discussed several ways through which senior management in their organization builds HR legitimacy and reinforces the distinctive mastery climate. Some of these ways are described below, e.g., senior management endorsement of HR learning tools (e.g., see Participant 27), as well as through sharing success stories (e.g., 'sarasehan', as discussed by Participant 14 below):

“Leaders play a big role in showing what matters. ... If the leaders use and encourage the use of HR tools... When they agree, support and follow-up the HR initiatives, then the implementation would be good. ... If they are using it on their own and encourage their staff to do it, then it will be a successful initiative...” (Participant 27)

“We call them “sarasehan [sharing together in a close and intimate circle].” In a given year, we can have up to 22 “sarasehans.” In these events, the CEO meets and discusses with the employees the philosophies and expectations [to learn]; as well as hearing [work] grievances from them. We learned that direct communication matters [in instilling the learning philosophy].” (Participant 14)

The third set of statements that informed alignment between the HR function and senior management revolved around relevance (i.e., the perceived usefulness and significance of HR practices to organizational “users” (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004)). HR professionals believed that the relevance of HR practices geared towards a mastery climate could be fostered by co-creating these practices with the senior management team and other departmental stakeholders, including employees. This way, they ensured relevance of the HR practice to organizational strategy and stakeholder needs, thereby reinforcing the message to employees that mastery is valued in their organizations. For instance, launching HR programmes in a prototype state and adjusting them according to stakeholder feedback is seen as one of the ways to achieve and maintain such relevance. Participants 31 and 01 elaborate on how they co-create this climate with organizational stakeholders:

“Stakeholder management. The worst thing you can do is to just sit down and design the HR programme yourself. You need to get out, walk and discuss with other departments, such as operation, sales, etc. We just need to make sure our program is “half-baked” and ask for their input to improve. When it is being implemented, it would make them feel that it is not just HR's but their program as well. We call this a spirit of co-creation.” (Participant 31)

“The way we work now is to put stronger emphasis on launching an initiative early and then adding on to it later step-by-step. We are then looking for our employees' feedback at every step of the way to improve our initiative that has been launched earlier. We are accepting the fact that it is okay not to be perfect at first launch. While ensuring the baseline quality and managing the risk, we believe it is better for us to deliver something, or anything, fast rather than delivering something perfect but taking a long time.” (Participant 01)

Alignment between HR sub-functions

A second theme that emerged was the coherence and alignment of HR practices within the HR function and between HR team members. The first set of statements under

this theme is about the alignment of HR practices with organizational strategy and policies. This differentiation is similar to the vertical/strategic alignment suggested by Posthuma et al. (2013), which ranges from principles to products of HR services. It was deemed important that the strategic intent to build a climate that fosters learning and knowledge sharing (i.e., HR principles) is reflected in the set-up of the HR policies and the implementation of the HR practices, to facilitate employee learning and mastery (i.e., HR product). The strategic alignment of HR practices also includes the horizontal/internal alignment within the HR function itself in order to facilitate the establishment of organizational mastery climates. Participants argued that when there is alignment among these practices, they synergistically enhance and reward the expected behaviours. For instance, Participants 24 and 01 discuss how all HR practices reinforce each other in shaping employee learning motivation and behaviour. Through this alignment, HR professionals increased understandability and relevance of HR practices for the creation of distinctive mastery climates. Some illustrative comments include (See Table 2):

Table 2
Vertical alignment theme with illustrating excerpts

Principles:	<i>"The most important thing is the spirit of learning new things. ... This same criterion [would then] exist consistently in our HR policies... Let's say in our recruitment practices, for example the way we interview people, etc..." (Participant 14)</i>
Policies:	<i>"Everything that the HR function does must be aligned to create that learning climate. HR policy must be supportive. If we do not give ample room for them to connect with each other, or facilitate that learning, we can't sustain the culture." (Participant 18)</i>
Practices:	<i>"We put the expected [learning and mastery] values as one of the important factors in our performance appraisal process. Not just in terms of managing their performance and rewarding them; development and promotion would also "stem" from the acquisition of these values by the employees." (Participant 24)</i>
Products:	<i>"It is about the competency to learn and adapt. Our development focuses on how we can learn better, build internal learning motivation and having a mindfulness to learn. Then it is about governance. When we ask people to learn, we need to prepare the policies and facilities to support it, such as online, mobile and collaborative learning platforms, etc. This comprehensive approach will then build our employees' willingness, skills and attitude to learn." (Participant 01)</i>

Participants specifically mentioned the significance of having a shared mindset among the members of the HR team. Such a common mindset within the HR function is deemed supportive toward the consistency of the HR message, as it encourages the members' ability and willingness to adjust and share key information with each other (see Participant 13 below). Cohesion within the HR team therefore also supports creating consensus on the role and importance of a mastery climate within the organization.

“To ensure internal HR alignment [in establishing the learning climate], we need to have a mindset of “One HR.” So, whenever any of my team goes out of the HR room, they represent the entire HR function and not just their own function... Every HR function has its fair share. Learning and development is important as they handle performance and talent management. Talent acquisition is critical, especially during our growth phase, as they need to bring in a big number of high-potential employees fast but balanced with the quality of hire. Organizational development is ever evolving as we need to ensure we have the right structure. Structure is like a house. The foundation needs to be correct.” (Participant 13)

Alignment between the HR function and employees

The final theme that emerged from the interviews focuses on the alignment between the HR function and the employees, i.e., a “learning ecosystem” – as referred to by participants – and the role of clear communication. This involved both direct communication, e.g., in departmental meetings as Participant 26 describes below, and rewards that enhance employee motivation. Participants argued that HR systems must possess a set of unique characteristics, which are related to the process by which a consistent message about HR content is sent to employees. A supportive HR communication effort is considered to be distinct, continuous and understandable, as well as communicating a clear set of behavioural consequences that build and reinforce employees’ internal motivation to learn.

Participants acknowledged the importance of consistently aligning the expected employee attitudes and behaviours to organizational rewards. When it comes to HR reward initiatives, there was some evidence of providing rewards to encourage and clarify the expected and valued behaviours. This came through both in terms of monetary (e.g., performance bonus) and non-monetary rewards (e.g., innovation competition, contribution point system). The participants claimed that career-related rewards eventually reinforce the intrinsic motivation to learn. Wider incentives in the HR system may consist of performance-based pay, an internal promotion system, extensive use of training, performance management and internal communication practices. Finally, some participants (e.g., Participant 12 below) also mentioned that the absence of punishment – both from the organization and their social circle – for unsuccessful experimentation also sent a strong signal of the intended organizational mastery climate. These incentives, alongside a lack of reprimand for failure, provide strong communication tools that signify the importance of the expected learning and mastery behaviours.

“The first thing to ensure was a clear understanding. We communicated what kind of climate we want to achieve; compared to what we had at that time. Then, we tried to cascade it by level and function. We made it very specific, operationalising what our values look like in real life. Let's say our "learning humility" value... Every department needs to discuss "what it looks like and how to achieve it?" and we topped it off by engagement activities, such as a video competition. In some departments, we try to integrate this even more in their morning briefing where each employee takes turns in sharing what they did align with that value.” (Participant 26).

“We create a learning ecosystem with "#AllTeachersAllStudents" to brand our movement. This [employee training and development initiative] includes the incentive piece. We want to communicate that learning doesn't belong exclusively to HR. So that if I am an expert in one field, how can I be motivated to create a module and teach it? Our role here is only as the administrative "gatekeeper." If you managed to do it, you will be incentivised using a points system. This is good for your executive visibility to build your career as well as your own self-fulfilment. So, this is the bottom-up... [approach to establish learning climate].” (Participant 06)

“We rely a lot on employees' on-the-job learning. There were so many projects running in the past few years. There was no template for them to do the job, so they need to build everything from scratch, and this makes the employees learn a lot. We always accentuate to our high-potential employees not to be afraid of failing or making mistakes. If you make a mistake, admit it. Don't be afraid of talking about it and then move on. This encourages their initiative and innovation. We would not punish their creativity. These kinds of paradigms are very much upheld dearly in our organization.” (Participant 12)

Discussion

This paper explored how HR professionals orchestrate organizational mastery climates. Findings suggest the importance of alignment between HR stakeholders and within the HR function for signalling distinctive, consistent and consensual messages. Two key theoretical contributions arise from this study concerning (1) the crucial roles HR professionals play in the HRM-Performance relationship in general, and in creating organizational learning climates in particular; and (2) the importance of vertical and horizontal alignment for establishing organizational climates. These contributions are discussed below, along with the study's practical implications, limitations and implications for future research.

The study's first theoretical contribution concerns the crucial role that the HR function plays in establishing an organizational mastery climate. Corroborating contemporary HR profession maps – such as the one from the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) in the UK – this study confirms the importance of HR professionals having knowledge of “Culture and Behaviour” (i.e., understanding people's behaviour and creating the right organization culture) as well as “Working Inclusively” (i.e., working and collaborating across boundaries, effectively and inclusively, to achieve positive outcomes) (CIPD, 2021). In this context, the study provides a broader understanding of the HRM–Performance relationship; which currently revolves around the question of which HRM practices or systems are relevant for establishing climates conducive to learning and performance (e.g., Chow & Liu, 2009; Den Hartog & Verburg, 2004; Úbeda-García et al., 2018). While line managers' role has increasingly been discussed, HR professionals' role in orchestrating and setting the contextual stage for establishing the intended climate has been relatively neglected. Thus, the findings from this study inform the “black box” of HRM (Boxall & Purcell, 2016) by providing a voice for HR professionals in this process.

The findings also reinforce the merit of HR systems theory (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004) and its emphasis on signalling HR messages in a distinctive, consistent and consensual manner in understanding the role that HR professionals and the HR function play in establishing mastery climates. The answer to how HR professionals signal these messages to stakeholders in the organization was through alignment. In order to establish congruent mastery perceptions across organizational constituents, this study showed that alignment between – at least – three stakeholders is critical, i.e., the senior management team, the HR function and the employees. This constitutes the study's second theoretical contribution. Beyond the extant literature that emphasises the strategic alignment of HR practices (e.g., Posthuma et al., 2013) that happens at the top of the organization, alignment is also deemed important to happen horizontally across the different HR sub-functions, as well as in relation to employees' intrinsic motivation to maintain a “learning ecosystem.” Expanding Bowen and Ostroff's (2004) seminal assertion on HR system strength to establish organizational climate, this study shows that there are multiple alignments between multiple parties that take place to establish system strength.

Practical implications

Practically, this study would be beneficial for those involved in people management

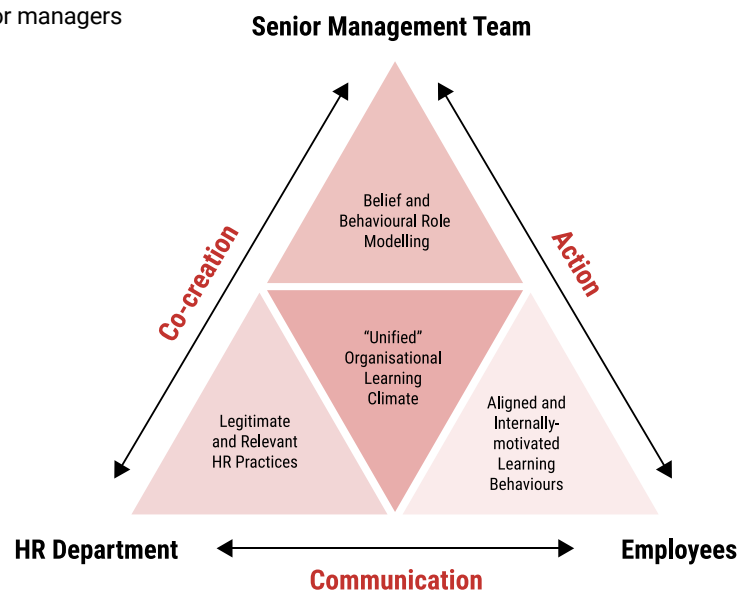
to establish a strong and unified organizational learning climate. The checklist below and Figure 2 are designed to summarise and illustrate these multiple alignments of stakeholder interests.

For establishing an organizational learning climate, it is important for people managers to:

- Be aware of senior management philosophy and beliefs. The importance of learning and mastery is deeply rooted in leadership *belief and behavioural role modelling*.
- Encourage/convince senior managers to adopt mastery behaviours and related HR practices (**Action**). This creates consensus in the organization and creates consistent top-down messaging of key values and expectations. Essentially, senior management endorsement builds the overall legitimacy of the HR function and the relevance of its practices (*i.e., legitimate and relevant HR practices*).
- Co-create people management practices with the senior management team and other organizational stakeholders (**Co-creation**) to reinforce the consistency of the message and to increase HR legitimacy.
- Align the learning ecosystem via various communication efforts (**Communication**) that provide distinct, continuous understandable signals to establish employees' motivation to maintain such an ecosystem.
- Provide clear set of rewards that reinforce employees' internal motivation to learn, and to establish a psychologically safe learning environment for trial and error in encouraging mastery (*i.e., aligned and internally-motivated learning behaviours*).

Figure 2.

Illustrative practical model for managers



Study limitations

Despite the advantages of being able to access the perspectives of multiple key HR decision makers across different industries, this study has several limitations. Wright and Nishii (2006) pointed out the importance of scrutinizing the distinction between intended vs. implemented vs. experienced HRM. As the data is based exclusively on the perspectives of the senior HR managers, this study might be inherently biased to the strategic intentions of these decision makers. Learning from Herd et al.'s (2018) study on employees' perceptions on strategic human resource development alignment, there is a need to further validate the actual implementation of these alignments, the employees' experiences as well as their perceptions on how the different HR practices affect their actual learning behaviour. Deeper or more micro-level theoretical and empirical inferences – for example, using motivational concepts such as learning goal orientations (Elliot et al., 2011) – might be beneficial to clarify how these HR practices and their postulated alignments influence the employees' learning motivation.

Conclusion

Using thirty-four in-depth interviews with senior HR leaders, this study explored how HR professionals contribute to establishing organizational mastery climates. In line with HR systems theory, findings show the instrumental mechanisms through which HR messages are signalled to employees from senior management and the HR function. As such, the study identified strategic and internal alignment as key mechanisms through which HR professionals signal messages to employees regarding valued, expected and rewarded learning behaviours. In expanding the black box of HRM, this study concludes that the HR function and HR professionals play a pivotal role in both creating the signals and in carrying the signals to stakeholders. Practically, this requires (1) co-creation of HR signals with senior management; (2) encouraging and facilitating senior management action that role models desired behaviours; and (3) clear communication of messages to employees.

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