
Editorial

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In 2005, Sørensen provocatively called Tamara readers to “deface” Human Resource Management (HRM) in his article [Defacing the Corporate Body, or: Why HRM Deserves a Kick in the Teeth](#). He asked us to recognize ourselves in fictional Linda, a recently unemployed woman, let go due to restructuring and disciplined through pamphlets and pictograms.

In this editorial, we remind readers of this classic text and offer it as a mirror. Despite its two decades of age, it remains as relevant today as when it was first published. If anything, HRM has become even less human and less oriented toward people. The tools have changed from printed pamphlets to PowerPoint decks, from corporate newsletters to web FAQs, from “corporate talk” sentences crafted by communication officers to those generated by artificial intelligence. The tone has softened, the aesthetics have improved, but the logic remained the same: regulate, normalize, and manage affect.

Now, twenty years later, Hartz, Harvie, and Lilley recount a different, and not fictional, story: the purge of critical scholarship at the University of Leicester. Their article shows how the same logic Sørensen found in a Danish unemployment office has crept, suited, and credentialed into the university.

Although the articles are decades apart, the contexts and managerial fashions both diagnose the same intensification of control.

The media of domination have evolved from pamphlets and clip-art to decks, FAQs, dashboards, and “how-to” portals, but the logic remains: codify behavior, pathologize dissent, and ensure obedience. Sørensen calls this the intensification of control. Hartz et al. supply the institutional choreography: a 59-page “Case for Change,” minutes that praise “dignified” leaders while disciplining critics, and letters that threaten titles and access for those who speak up online. Different fonts – same song.

We revisit Sørensen’s text because we may all become Linda faster than we think. In neo-liberal universities, priorities may change, strategies may be updated, and we deemed useless. What happened in Leicester is not an exception; it is emblematic of a modern university.

The following two vignettes sharpen our point:

First: When an academic from a top world university reposted a short note on Facebook from the BBC announcing the death of a colleague, he was then instructed by the university’s Human Resources and Communications department to add a disclaimer: “Please do not post comments

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that may damage the university's brand." The media covered the potentially damaging event; it was no secret. An employee of the university committed suicide due to work heartbreak (does this term even exist in management vocabulary?). He was a dedicated researcher and teacher, cared about his work, and tried to do it to the best of his ability. He spent his final years working day and night, taking student papers with him for grading when visiting family, performing administrative duties on weekends, and answering work emails late into the evening.

His workload resembled that of others he knew working in the neoliberal academy. However, tragically for him, he strove to do everything to the best of his ability. What brand could possibly matter more than the life of this human being? Than the work of a dedicated academic? Which Human Resource function prioritizes anything above a person who invests so deeply in their work?

Teachers tell students that a brand rests on trust and quality. But what do these terms signify at any given moment? And what remains once they fade? For this, too shall pass.

Second: In a strategy meeting dedicated to quality development at another Top World 100 university where one of us worked, all the participants spent hours discussing nothing but how their university's online images compared to other online images. The authorities ignored those who raised other points of discussion, not as one ignores something trivial or off-topic, but as one ignores something that does not exist. Brand is everything, everything is brand. Organizations spend enormous sums to create it. These are sums they refuse to allocate to matters like employment, working conditions, or even basic business probity. They pour enormous amounts of funds into activities that support such content-free branding. A powerful rankings business has emerged, complete with intricate and valuable mechanics and maintenance logic at every level. Marketing departments reap the profits, while games constantly unfold between the symbols of various brands, fighting precious battles in the symbolic arenas of thriving specialized corporations or in the pages of the relevant media.

Management does not seem to care anymore about who performs the work and under what conditions. The top 100 universities or big businesses do not seem to afford to pay their employees decently. Yet, they are more affluent than ever before. Human resources departments do not seem to be concerned about providing good working conditions. Retaining employees is not essential, and when people talk about "retaining competence," they mean ownership in the sense of copyright. A brand seems to be about "excellence." Organizations invest in it and value it over the life of a good employee or over everything we cannot measure.

Or, is it really? Voices proclaiming other values may fall on deaf ears of managerialism, but it is the ears that are deaf, not the values that are mute. Values of work, life, and management still matter, and concerned participants and authors continue to raise them. Such as the ones speaking up in this issue of *Tamara*.

References

Sørensen, Bent Meier (2005). *Defacing the corporate body, or: Why HRM deserves a kick in the teeth*. *Tamara*, 3(4), 7–26.