COVID-19 and a Pursuit of Building Learning Agile Organisational Climate: Managerial Perspective

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The illiterate of the 21st century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn, and relearn.

— *Alvin Toffler* —

Research Context

- CIPD (2020): (1) pandemic-related work rearrangements and challenges, (2) "agile HR" ways of working and responding to change.

- Learning agility: Ability to deal with new experiences flexibly and rapidly by trying new behaviour and making quick adjustments so new learning will be realised when one does not know exactly what to do (Burke, 2016).

- Heightened practitioner interests beyond robust empirical substantiation (De Meuse, 2015; 2017). The organisational context and practices within which learning agility is encouraged and manifested (or not) need to be explored further (DeRue, Ashford & Myers, 2012).

- HR context (policies, procedures) and practices that lead to learning agility will serve as the main area of investigation as they aid employees' understanding of what behaviours are expected and rewarded (Nerstad, Roberts & Richardsen, 2013; Černe et al., 2014; 2017).

Research Context

- HPWS applies to a broad range of HR practices that aim to make organisations more participative and flexible in order to be able to thrive and compete better in the current environment (Huselid, 1995; Guthrie, 2001).

- Despite empirical supports for the synergistic effect of HPWS, there is no consensus in determining **WHAT** specific practices form the HPWS bundle nor the mechanism **HOW** such HR system should work to reach the organisation objectives (Marin-Gracia & Tomas, 2016; Posthuma et al., 2013) (i.e., the "black box" of HRM; Boxall & Purcell, 2016).

- Objectives: (1) **WHAT** kind of HR practices that can esta-blish supportive learning context and (2) the mechanism on **HOW** such practices could achieve a synergistic effect toward the expected behaviour (i.e. learning agility).

Partici-pants and Methodo-logy

- Non-probability, purposive sampling strategy through professional network; as well as snowball sampling.

- 34 in-depth semi-structured interviews have been conducted with senior HR leaders in Indonesia from 20 different industries (from financial service to retail) and scales of businesses (from 100 to 25.000 employees).

- The roles involved Regional Chief HR Officer, Country/Chief HR Officer and functional-level HR Managers (Recruitment, Employee and Organisational Development, Talent Management, Reward and Internal Communication Managers).

- Corroborated by the literature review, the data is coded and analysed using thematic analysis through NVIVO 12.
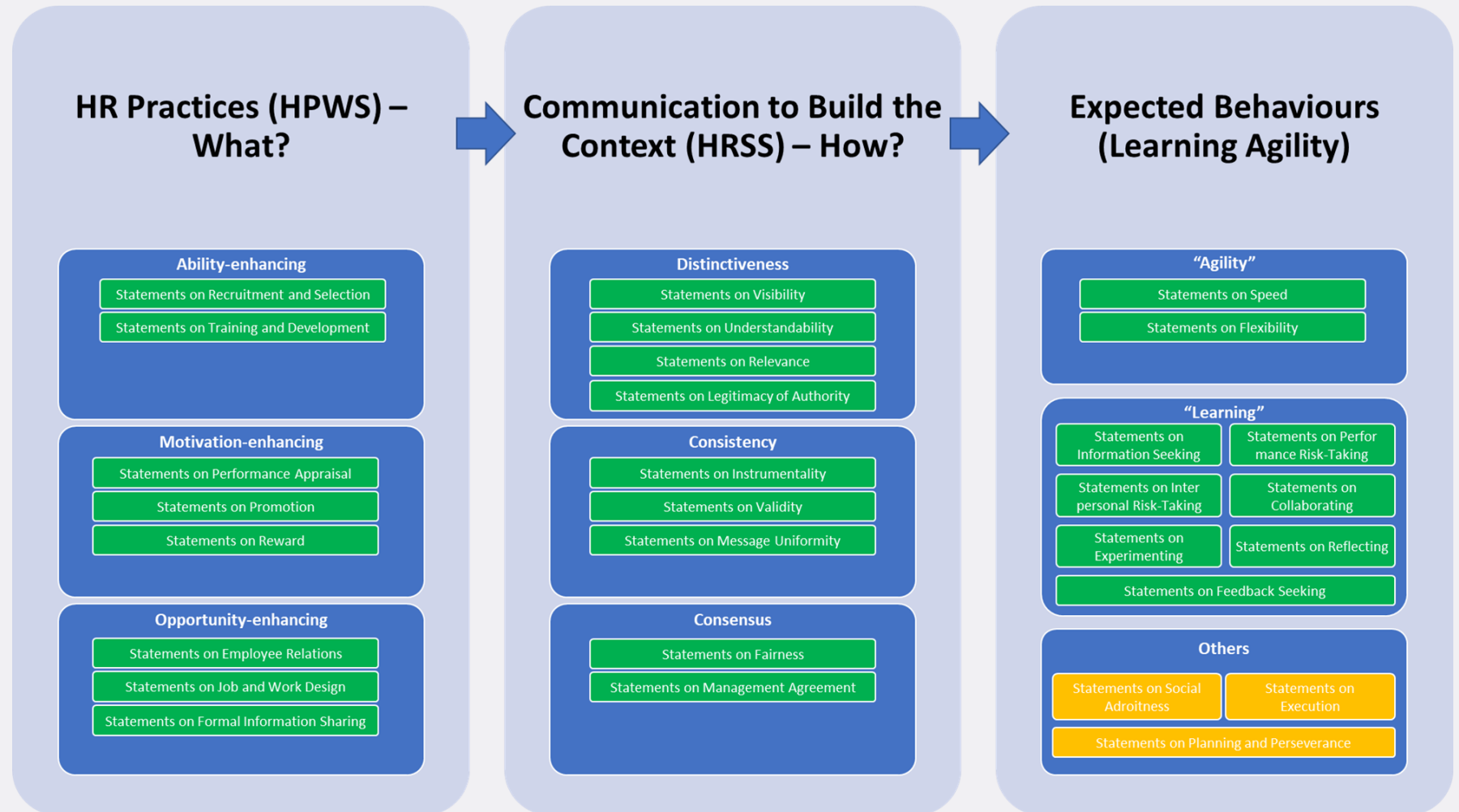
Pandemic-related Organisational Context

Challenges

- The maximum is 1-2 days long. This is changing only because of COVID-19. Sometimes they might **not too enthusiastic** to participate in a training as they are already having too much things on their plate.
- COVID-19 forces us to embark on online learning faster. But this might not as effective as face-to-face. One of the problems is the **short attention span of people.**
- Due to COVID-19, we are launching **a virtual learning environment...** Specifically in developing the technical skills of our employees, HR always participates in contributing on the soft skill side.
- Due to COVID19, our company **L&D budget is also negatively impacted.**

Counter Challenges

- Provision of **unlimited opportunities,** although not everyone will able to see this… A person from design department can nominate themselves to be part of COVID-19 task force… One GM initiate to make his own WFH program to tackle the pandemic disruption…
- We **provide time for training since COVID-19.** Before it was very difficult as we are very much focusing on work delivery. The founder asks one of the business unit to do inter-functional sharing knowledge…
- Everything that the HR function does must be aligned to create that learning climate. **HR policy must be supportive,** e.g. during COVID19, we need to restrict business travel for education purpose. If we do not give ample room for them to connect with each other, or facilitate that learning, we cant sustain the culture.
- …the way we achieve that result is through **collaboration.** One example is that when we need to quickly reenginered our taxi service from delivering people to delivering goods during COVID-19 pandemic. Our strategy and transformation office needs to work with different functions, from operation, marketing, finance until customer care.
- …Hence, we change the way we develop and engage our talents... We do not use external source at all. The most impactful program we have is our **experience sharing program.** It's like a bite-size, learning podcast. Let's say for Change Management, we asked one of our senior leaders that has experience in this area to share. The participation and engagement rate was continuously high.
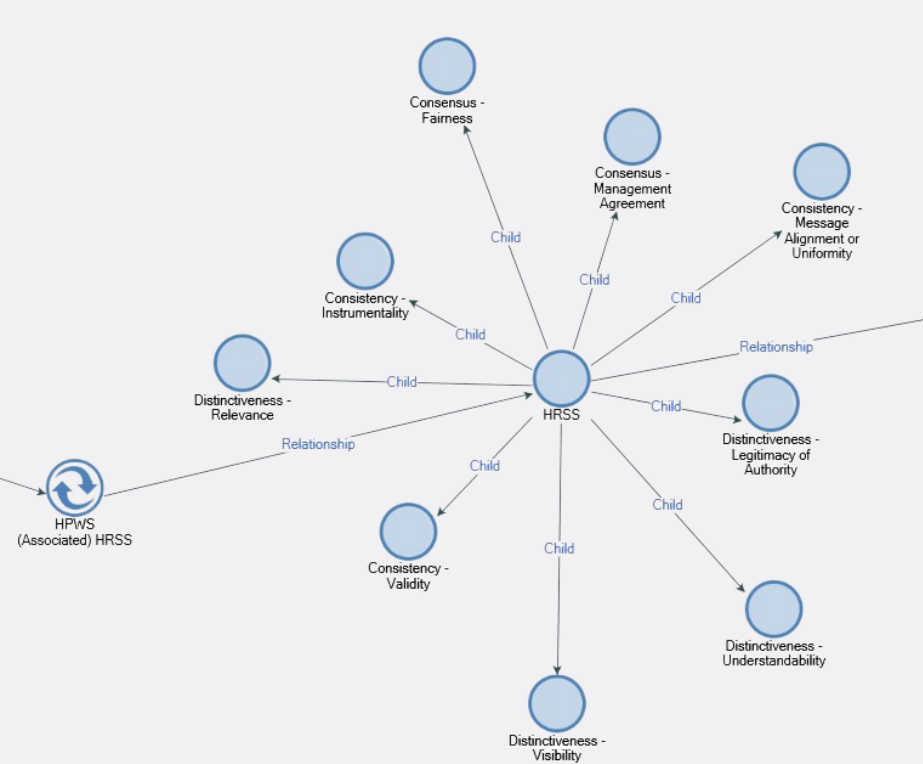
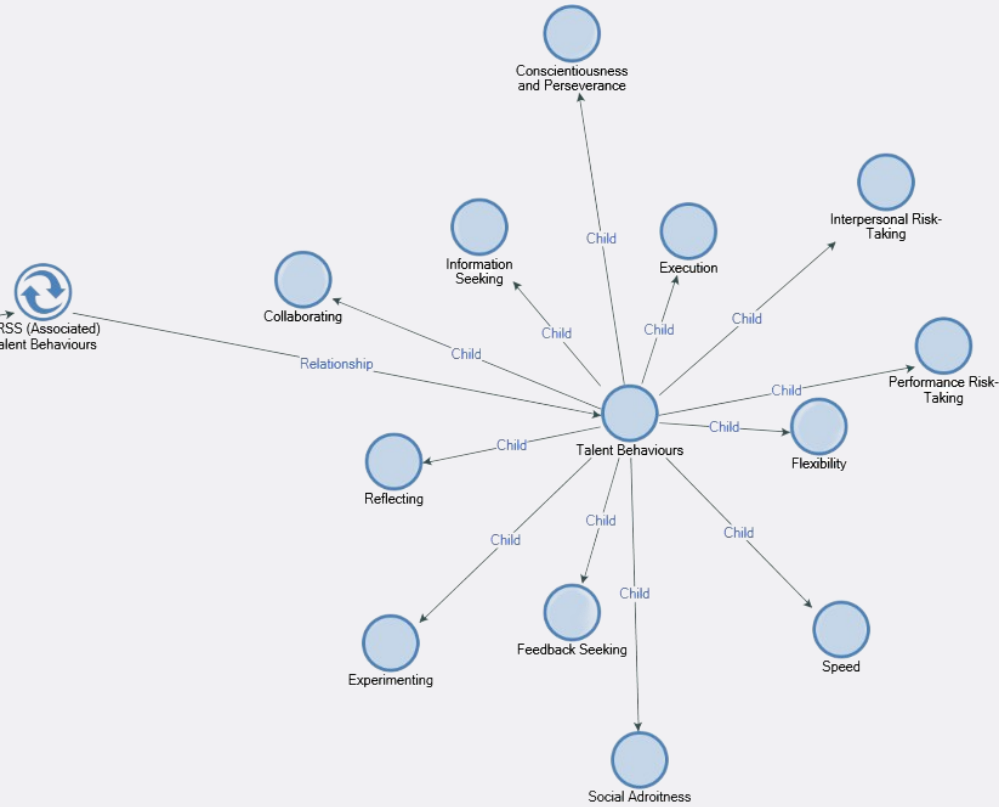**WHAT: HR Practices/HPWS** (Marin-Gracia & Tomas, 2016; Posthuma et al., 2013)
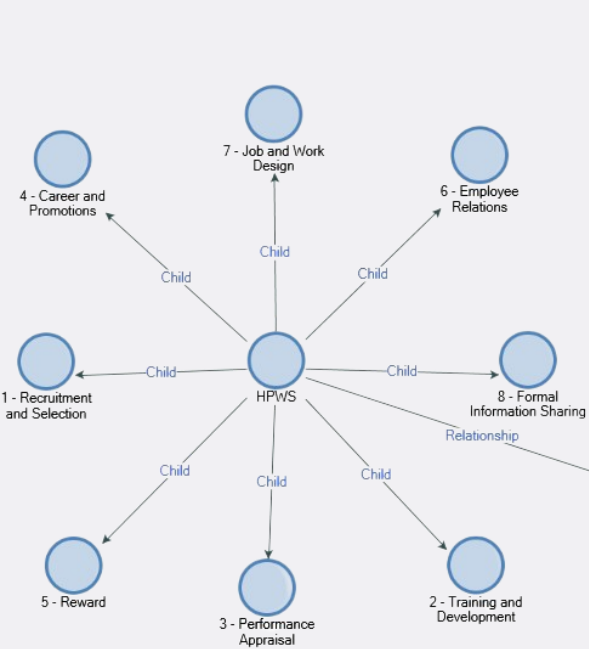
HOW: HR System Strength (Bowen & Ostroff, 2004; 2016)
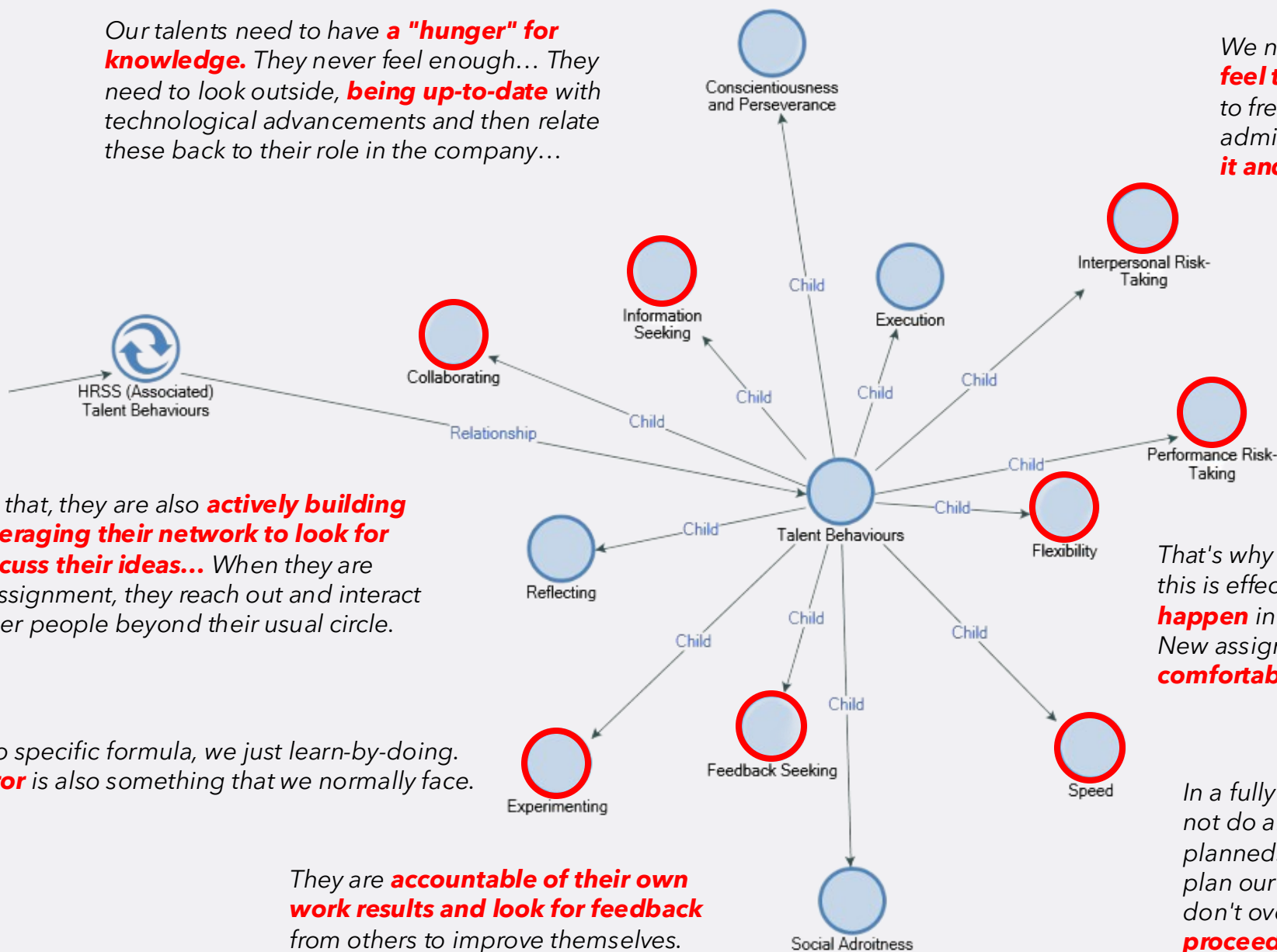
Learning Agility (Burke, 2016; Hoff & Burke, 2017)

Our talents need to have **a "hunger" for knowledge.** *They never feel enough… They need to look outside, **being up-to-date** with technological advancements and then relate these back to their role in the company…*

We need our leaders to be humble. They **always feel that they need to learn something,** *even to fresh graduates… If you make a mistake, admit it. Don't be afraid asking for help, **talking it and then move on.***

The founder himself is an example of agile learner. **He was a doctor that changed career to be a taxi businessman…** *They exactly know what they want and from where they can get it.*

Besides that, they are also **actively building and leveraging their network to look for and discuss their ideas…** *When they are being assignment, they reach out and interact with other people beyond their usual circle.*

That's why I said that we are organic as we still see this is effective **and don't know what would happen** *in the future. …being adaptive to change. New assignment, situation, target...* **They are comfortable with that.**

There was no specific formula, we just learn-by-doing. **Trial and error** *is also something that we normally face.*

They are **accountable of their own work results and look for feedback** *from others to improve themselves.*

In a fully process-oriented company, we would not do anything before the process is well-planned. We are not going to do that. We do plan our way in achieving our results, but we don't overcomplicate thing. **We execute and proceed with our plan fast, but continuously improving it along the way.**

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? If you managed to do it, you will be incentivised using points system. This is good for your executive visibility to build your career as well as your own self-fulfilment.

(Beyond monetary and non-monetary reward) **We would not punish their creativity.** These kinds of paradigms are very much upheld dearly in our organisation.

We just need to make sure our program is **"half-baked" and "co-create"** with them to improve along the way… It is okay not to be perfect… It is better for us to **deliver something, or anything, fast rather than delivering something perfect** but taking a long time.

In Indonesia, it's a bit difficult to gather such evidence (for performance appraisal). As it is impossible to capture someone's behaviour all the time, **we need to depend on other's feedback.** But, Indonesian people have a high tendency to avoid conflict and please others, so **it is difficult to get a real, honest feedback here.**

When I first joined the company, I asked **the founder** why did he trust his employees so much. His response was a question of "Do you want to make this company go bankrupt? If not, why shouldn't I trust you? You will do your best." This "spirit" is then **reflected in all our policies.**

We **put the expected values (i.e. knowledge sharing) 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 these values acquisition.**

If the leaders use and encourage the use of HR tools… When they are support, share and follow-up the HR initiatives, then the implementation would be good. **The example was IDP. If they are using it on their own…**

(Beyond operationalisation) The higher you got, the more stubborn you will be. **So we let others tell them the message…** We even invite a Movie Director to talk to our managers… **So "insight" is important.**
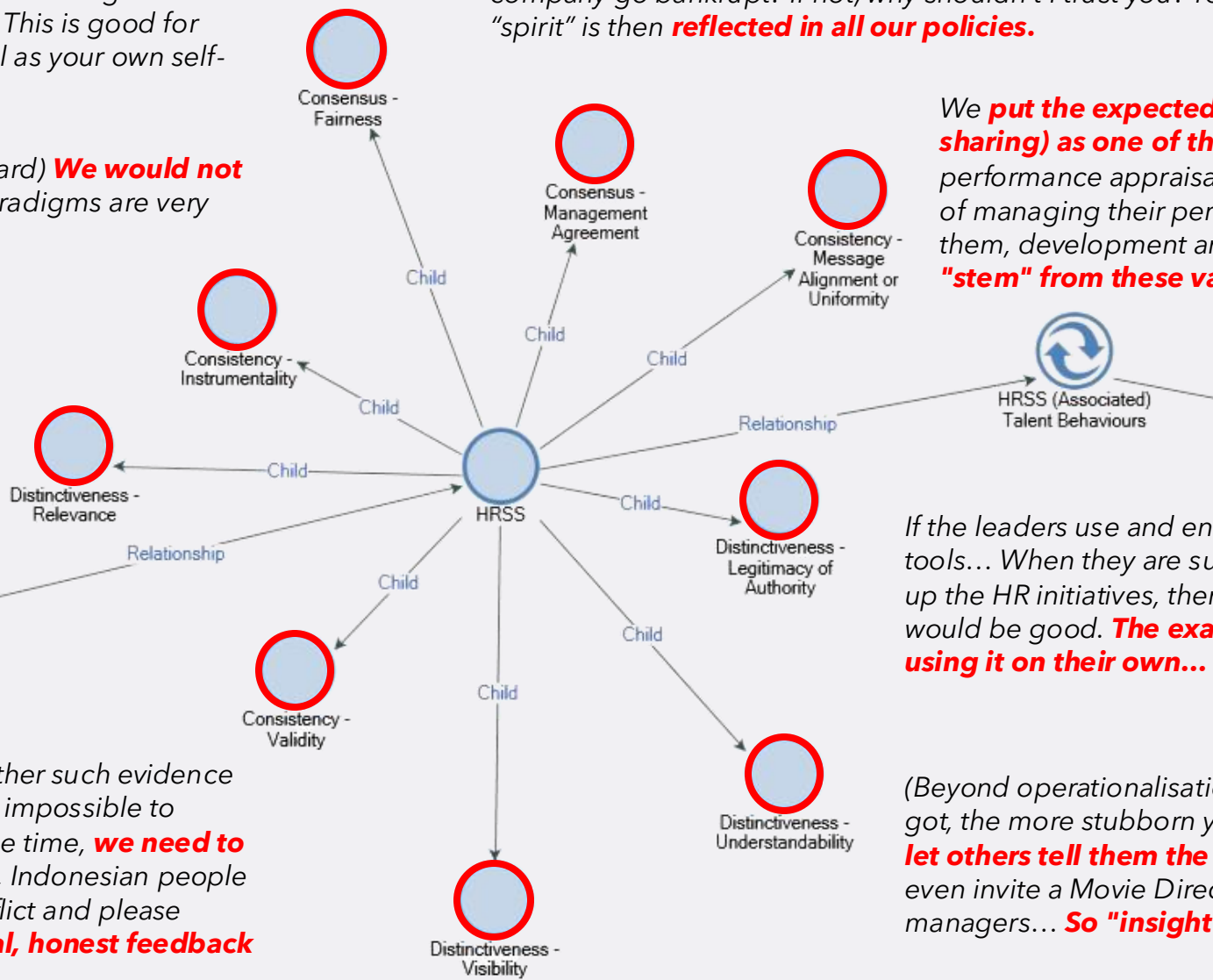
(Beyond continuous communication) We start by creating a vision, **a rallying platform** where we make it clear where we are heading. We create a learning ecosystem with "#AllTeachersAllStudents" to **brand our movement.**

Consensus - Fairness

Consensus - Management Agreement

Consistency - Message Alignment or Uniformity

Consistency - Instrumentality

Distinctiveness - Relevance

HRSS

HRSS (Associated) Talent Behaviours

Relationship

Child

Distinctiveness - Legitimacy of Authority

Consistency - Validity

HPWS (Associated) HRSS

Relationship

Distinctiveness - Understandability

Distinctiveness - Visibility

We see potential in 4 aspects: Values alignment, desire to grow, learning agility and informal influence. If you do your work well at your position, as a company, we will appreciate that with salary and bonus at that position, **but not necessarily a promotion.** Promotion, especially to leadership positions with bigger scope of responsibility, call for **those indicators that are beyond good, past performance.**

We recruit for agility. We have development camp or hackathon. We give a project challenge, let's say, you need to finish developing this software by 3PM today. Do they have that ability and mindset to achieve it? Do they make it happen?

In terms of the "HOW" measurement, **we proportion it equally with the "WHAT," i.e. 50-50.** For the HOW, we use our 8 qualities, such as how you collaborate, communicate, think big, etc.

There is a company bonus, simply based on company performance. There is a guaranteed bonus of 1 time per year but if the company achieves more, **everyone will get the same additional multiplier.**

Specifically for our product team, our performance measurement **uses quarterly "OKR"** (Objectives - Key Results) with shorter appraisal rounds.

Although **we don't have PA,** leaders are still accountable to align and set clear expectations. **Goals are still be cascaded and monitoring still takes place.**
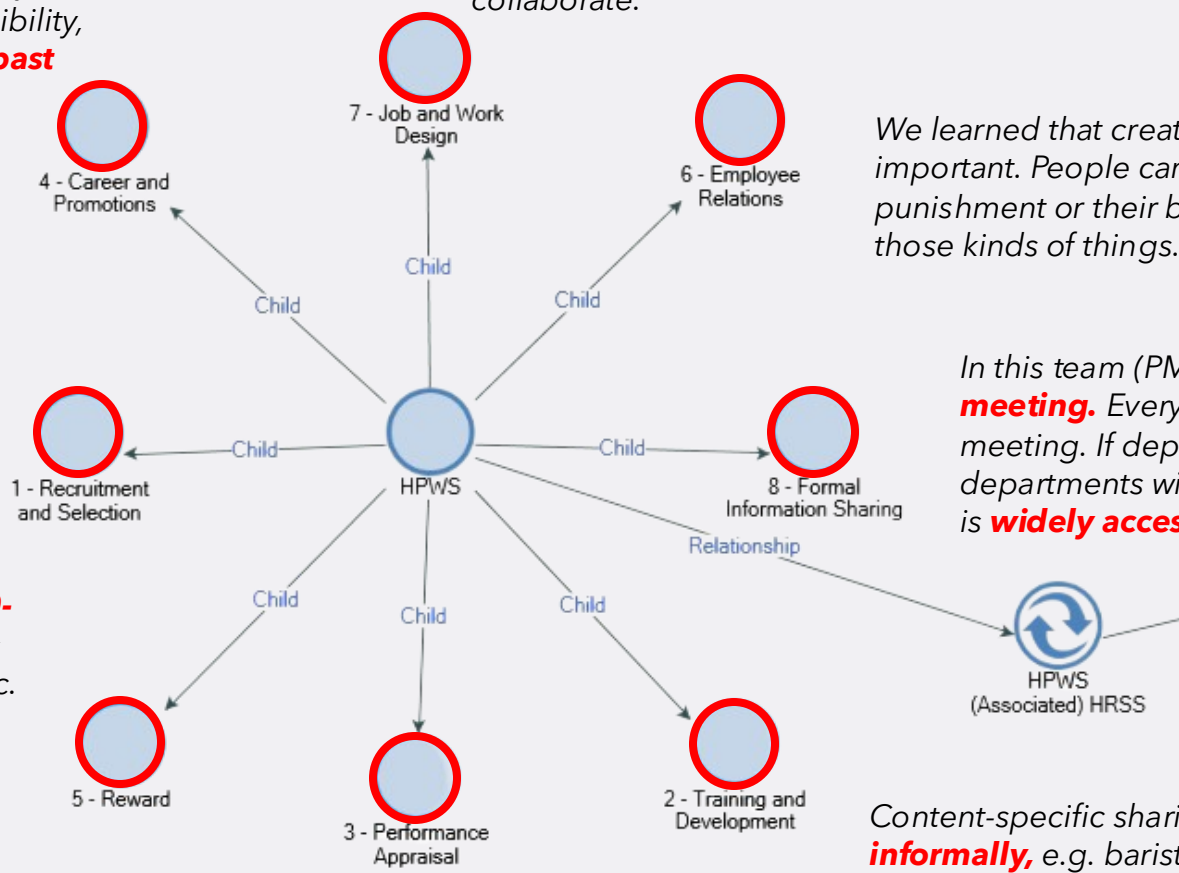
We establish **a cross-divisional, adhoc team, to execute a strategy**… Simplified the structure and span of control, shortened layer; to ensure speedier decision making and closer distance to customer… We create **a specific product and stream structure to build the product.** We put different expertise within it, hence it's easier for them to collaborate.

We learned that creating **a safe environment to learn** is important. People can't learn and work if they are afraid of punishment or their boss. Their energy is depleted to manage those kinds of things.

In this team (PMO), we have a **"cadence" weekly meeting.** Every BOD is committed to fully attend this meeting. If department A does something, other departments will know about it as well. Data to support is **widely accessible by everyone** within the company.

Content-specific sharing forums **made by employees informally,** e.g. barista training. This is beyond HR department.

After finishing our Senior Business Course, they are encouraged to have **"internship" in other companies (not just own department).** They got paid but entirely working in other companies (e.g. even in palliative care).

7 - Job and Work Design
4 - Career and Promotions
6 - Employee Relations
Child
Child
Child
1 - Recruitment and Selection
Child
HPWS
Child
8 - Formal Information Sharing
Relationship
Child
Child
Child
5 - Reward
3 - Performance Appraisal
2 - Training and Development
HPWS (Associated) HRSS

Conclusion

- Agility is about having speed and flexibility in navigating the continuing organisational changes due to pandemic. "Authenticity," hunger for learning, experimentation and collaboration build these two factors.

- Having "right" HR practices matter, but it should be a by-product of conversation. As agility demands speed and flexibility, "co-creating" them with users bear value.

- To build the intended learning context, HR "messages" should be distinct, consistent and consent with both the management and the employees. Alignment is the central theme.

Thank You!

Hope it is useful for you. Any feedback/question is welcomed.

Participant Code	Generic Job Title	Industry	Scale of Business (i.e., Number of Employees)	Participant Code	Generic Job Title	Industry	Scale of Business (i.e., Number of Employees)
Participant 01	Chief HR Officer	Banking	±25.000	Participant 18	Chief HR Officer	Carpentry	±2.000
Participant 02	HRBP Manager	Banking	±25.000	Participant 19	Chief HR Officer	Media - Electronic	±21.000
Participant 03	HR System Manager	Banking	±25.000	Participant 20	Chief HR Officer	Media - Traditional	±21.000
Participant 04	Chief Operation Officer	Consultancy	±100	Participant 21	Chief HR Officer	Oil and Gas	±200
Participant 05	Chief Executive Officer	Consultancy	±100	Participant 22	HRBP Manager	Oil and Gas	±200
Participant 06	Chief HR Officer	E-commerce	±5.000	Participant 23	Regional Chief HR Officer	Pharmaceutical	±12.000
Participant 07	HRBP Manager	E-commerce	±5.000	Participant 24	Chief HR Officer	Plant Breeding	±1.000
Participant 08	Training Manager	E-commerce	±5.000	Participant 25	HRBP Manager	Plant Breeding	±1.000
Participant 09	Training Manager	E-commerce	±5.000	Participant 26	Training Manager	Plant Breeding	±1.000
Participant 10	Chief HR Officer	Education	±300	Participant 27	HR Advisor	Property Development	±500
Participant 11	Chief HR Officer	Financing Service	±3.000	Participant 28	Training Manager	Property Development	±500
Participant 12	Chief HR Officer	Financing Service	±11.000	Participant 29	HRBP Manager	Property Development	±500
Participant 13	Talent Manager	Financing Service	±11.000	Participant 30	Chief HR Officer	Public Service	±100
Participant 14	Training Manager	Food and Beverages	±2.000	Participant 31	Chief HR Officer	Transportation	±4.000
Participant 15	Org. Development Manager	Food and Beverages	±2.000	Participant 32	Talent Manager	Transportation	±4.000
Participant 16	Recruitment Manager	Food and Beverages	±2.000	Participant 33	HR Manager	University	±300
Participant 17	Chief HR Officer	Food and Beverages	±2.000	Participant 34	College Dean	University	±500