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Abstract

One of the defining characteristics of human resource management, which some scholars argue differentiates it from personnel management, is the proposition that responsibility for the management of an organisations human resources be devolved to line managers (Guest, 1987; Legge, 1989; Kirkpatrick et al, 1992). This paper examines the extent to which greater responsibility for the management of horticultural workers is devolved to supervisors at one New South Wales public sector garden, Botanicus Perfectus. The argument of this paper is that human resource management's rhetoric of devolving greater responsibility down the line has been limited by a variety of factors. These include; a reluctance by supervisors to consider themselves part of the management hierarchy; implement human resource policies which they perceive as excessively bureaucratic; and the role of other levels of the management hierarchy which have limited line managers from utilising the autonomy devolved to them.
Introduction

Human resource management is, in theory, most clearly distinguished from other models of personnel management by its claims that responsibility be devolved to line managers (Kirkpatrick et al., 1992: 131). This paper examines the impact of a strategy to devolve responsibility for human resource policies to supervisors (senior horticulturists) within one New South Wales garden, Botanicus Perfectus. This garden, dating from 1816, is situated in Sydney, employs approximately 120 horticultural workers and consists of 64 hectares. The paper questions the degree to which line managers are willing to accept the responsibility which has been devolved to them. It also questions the extent to which their superiors in the management hierarchy are willing to allow them to utilise the greater autonomy which they have been provided with.

The paper is structured as follows. First, the rhetoric of decentralised responsibility requiring an integration of the behaviour and attitudes of line managers with that of the organisation's human resource policies are outlined. Second, the reaction of supervisors to the greater responsibility that has been devolved to them is explored. The conclusion synthesises the critical literature on decentralised human resource management with the main points raised by the empirical sections of the paper. The study relies primarily upon semi-structured interviews with human resource and line management at Botanicus Perfectus (the former human resource manager, Staff Development Officer and Curator/Manager), the Public Service Association industrial officer representing these horticultural workers and workplace delegates. Interviews were conducted in August 1993 and again in July 1994.

The Rhetoric of Decentralised Human Resource Management

Human resource management as theory stresses that line managers treat workers as valued assets, which they have a responsibility to develop, rather than
as costs they have to minimise (Kirkpatrick et al, 1992: 133). This is central to Guest's (1987) normative model of human resource management which emphasises the need for line managers to integrate the organisation's human resource policies towards labour within their own individual approach to labour management. As Guest argues, supervisors 'recognition of the importance of human resources and the need to engage in practices which engage this understanding is critical to successful business management' (Guest, 1987: 512). The rhetoric of human resource management, therefore, stresses a change in the attitudes and behaviour of line managers to one which conforms with the organisation's human resource policies and which emphasises the long term development of employees.

In contrast to the more pessimistic pronouncements regarding the fate of middle managers,¹ the human resource management literature advocates an expansion in the role of middle management (Legge, 1989). Fewer middle managers may be provided with an extended range of responsibilities whilst gaining greater recognition from senior management as being central to the successful introduction of organisational change (Dopson and Stewart, 1990: 13). Brewster and Smith (1990: 40), for example, argue that in Britain greater responsibility is being devolved to line managers and away from human resources, in particular in the area of training and development. Peters and Waterman contend that "excellent" American companies are also decentralising responsibility for personnel functions and financial budgets 'down the line' enhancing the autonomy of a considerable number of organisational members (1982: 310). They highlight the role of 'store managers' at Dana who "had unusual control over hiring and firing; they had their own financial control systems; they did their own purchasing - all tasks that are normally centralised" (1982: 212). They believe that the "trick" to decentralising responsibility to line managers "involves socializing the managers to believe they are would-be champions, yet at the
same time maintaining very substantial control where it counts" (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 213). Their argument is contradictory, however, with senior managers simultaneously encouraged to cull the ranks of middle management in imitation of more successful Japanese companies. Toyota are extolled as the model with five layers between senior management and supervisors in comparison to Ford with fifteen layers in its management hierarchy (Peters and Waterman, 1982: 313). Within Australia, Dawson (1991: 45) argues that greater responsibility should also be devolved to the supervisor who "not only holds a central position during the process of organisational change, but also, under the routine operation of new production arrangements". On the other hand, Roche and Turner (1994: 741) found, in their survey of human resource management in the Republic of Ireland, that line managers had greatest influence over the formulation and implementation of human resource policy where these policies were least developed in stark contrast to the theory of HRM "...which views line dominance and sophisticated human resource policies as aspects of the same overall proactive framework". The trend towards devolving responsibility to line management is clearly outlined within the management literature. The impact of such devolution in practice, however, is less certain.

**Strategy and Structure at Botanicus Perfectus**

Botanicus Perfectus has only been responsible for the development of its own human resource policies since 1989. Prior to this, the garden came under the control of the National Parks and Wildlife Service. During this period, a strong sense of animosity existed between horticultural workers and management in part because of the remoteness of the management group from the garden's horticultural workforce. Initial attempts to establish a human resource function at the garden also encountered resistance, with horticultural workers remaining suspicious of the actions of workplace management (former Human Resource Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1993). Human resource policies developed by
Botanicus Perfectus upon the recommendation of consultants and the formulation of a Corporate plan for the garden included the devolution of greater responsibility to line management, greater employee involvement in the running of the gardens and increased pay and career path potential for the horticultural workforce (Submission, 1991).

Greater responsibility was devolved to line management within Botanicus Perfectus following a review of the Garden's management strategy towards horticultural workers and the management structure itself. The garden's Corporate Plan outlined three goals for management - "Excellence, Staff Involvement, and Accountability" (Submission, 1991: 15). These goals required management to provide the horticultural workforce with greater involvement in decision-making within the workplace. For example, the submission suggested that horticultural labourers be given greater responsibility for installing irrigation systems, electrical wiring, propagation and the use of equipment which requires a special licence (Submission, 1991: 15). Furthermore, horticulturists were to be provided with greater opportunities to record plant details, determine plant requirements for propagation as well as enjoy "greater delegation and accountability for financial planning, training and resource allocation and a greater role in the day to day management of their area" (Submission, 1991:1). Horticulturists were also to be given greater responsibility for "...planning, costing, estimating materials and recommending acquisition and repagation of plants under their care" (Submission, 1991: 12). Management admitted that "It is clear that without an appropriate career structure and supporting salary...Those employees we are able to attract...quickly become disillussioned by the lack of progression..." (Submission, 1991: 9). The negotiation of an enterprise agreement in June 1993 sought to overcome this history of high labour turnover and poor morale through job rotation and the potential for career path progression (O'Donnell, 1994).
These changes in management strategy were also accompanied by changes in the structure of management. Changes in structure may follow changes in management strategy (Chandler, 1962) where "The formal structure of the organisation represents the distribution of formal power across roles and units..." (Kramar, 1990: 19). The garden's Corporate Plan "identified the need to review its structure to ensure that it is capable of supporting the organisation's mission and objectives" (Submission, 1991: 14) involving "the creation of Managers with greater delegation and accountability will provide a more efficient, better informed decision making process" (Submission, 1991: 9). As a result, two supervisor positions were abolished and replaced by the positions of Curator/Manager and Horticultural Development Officer. The former position aimed to co-ordinate work programs for all sections of the gardens and also have input into recruitment, training and disciplinary matters, while Horticultural Development Officers were to co-ordinate planning and plant propagation throughout the gardens and collate plant records (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1993). The Corporate Plan represented an attempt to transform the garden's strategy and structure to enable greater responsibility to be delegated to the horticultural workforce. The extent to which this strategy of delegation and involvement flowed through into actual workplace practice is, however, debateable.

Work Programs, Financial Budgets and Development Proposals
A series of job design workshops, undertaken during the negotiation of the enterprise agreement, highlighted that senior horticulturists (previously referred to as leading hands/foremen) wanted more responsibility for the management of their sections. Management decided to provide these supervisors with more responsibility for their own budgets and authority to spend within certain limits. Senior horticulturists, as team leaders, were also involved in selection and
recruitment of staff for their teams - which varied in size from five to ten workers. They were also involved in increased administration and paperwork regarding issues such as workers’ leave and compensation claims (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

The garden’s strategy of devolution also required senior horticulturists to formalise their control over other horticulturists through the preparation of quarterly work programs. These programs involved the detailing of projects to be undertaken in the next quarter as well as the staff hours and materials involved. Senior horticulturists had to determine in advance such variables as the amount of fertiliser they would use and the length of time it would take to re-edge a garden bed or to prune a rose garden. At the end of each quarter they also had to assess how successful they had been in adhering to the detail of the preceding quarter’s work program and write up a check list of all work completed. To undertake this check list they were required to gather together their staff, go through staff diaries and document who did what on which specific day (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Senior horticulturists argue that the preparation of these quarterly reports resulted in increased bureaucracy. On the whole it took two days to get an accurate quarterly work program completed and senior horticulturists contended that this was time they could ill afford to lose. The time taken to develop a works program was extended by the actions of the Curator/Manager who had a tendency of returning work programs to be rewritten. One senior horticulturist alleged that his work program was returned six times for reworking. Senior horticulturists also insisted that quarterly work programs were rarely followed in practice as Botanicus Perfectus is a large garden open to the public and at the mercy of the public, the weather and government instruction. One senor horticulturist described the process of making up his quarterly work program. He
arranged the relevant figures into what he believed to be a pleasing pattern and then thought up a detailed plan to correspond with these figures. Such a cynical approach to quarterly programs was less than an isolated example (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Furthermore, the preparation of quarterly work programs threatened to erode senior horticulturists' craft skills. The programs strict deadlines had little relevance to the maintenance of living garden beds. Horticultural workers rely on their craft knowledge and know, regardless of any quarterly work programs, that for example mid-winter pruning had to be undertaken in mid-winter. Senior horticulturists stated that they would have preferred a more simplified quarterly work program plan, which would been useful when planning the major winter pruning or the renovation of a number of lawns. By contrast, the existing system, where each senior horticulturist had to detail hours and equipment, was viewed as tedious and in practice rarely followed (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Senior horticulturists were also given greater responsibility for the preparation of financial budgets. Again however, they insisted that the preparation of these budgets was excessively bureaucratic and contrary to the reality of horticultural work. Budgeting involved a procedure referred to as 'zero funding budgeting' which required horticulturists to work out in precise detail what their budget for the next year would be. Everything was to be included, from the number of lawn mowers required to that of paper clips. Four senior horticulturists completed their own separate budgets which were then combined and the total submitted to finance. If this total fell within the government allocation for the running of the garden the budgets were approved, if not, certain items had to be cut out. Prior to this innovation, the cost of horticultural repairs (for example the mending of the roof of the depot) came out of the building services budget. Under 'zero funding',
these expenses were debited against their own individual budgets and horticulturists had therefore to build any anticipated repairs into their budget costings. Horticulturists insisted that this prescriptive approach to expenditure was at odds with the nature of horticultural work where on a daily basis they were at the mercy of the weather which these budgets took no account of. Again senior horticulturists argued that the time spent calculating these budgets minimised the time they could allocate to horticulture.

In addition to senior horticulturists, the garden's strategy of decentralising responsibility 'down the line' was also supposed to provide horticulturists with greater involvement in the development of proposals for plant propagation. Under level 6 of the enterprise agreement negotiated in June 1993, horticulturists were expected to:

a) Work under minimal supervision and therefore be required to exercise independent judgement at an advanced trade level and exercise initiative with regard to matters of minor complexity; and

b) Perform advanced trade level horticultural duties (such as development of botanical collections including detailed plant recording and documentation, field collection); (Parks and Garden Enterprise Agreement, 1993: 9).

Under the enterprise agreement horticulturists were initially transferred to level 5. To move to level 6 of the enterprise agreement they had to demonstrate that they were assisting in the "development of botanical collections" by preparing written proposals regarding the development of the gardens.

Management argued that preparing these documents represented the "carrot" for horticulturists to progress to level 6 (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus,
They insisted, however, that these proposals be forwarded for assessment to the horticulturists' immediate supervisors and from there upwards through the management hierarchy to ensure they complied with the stringent scientific and botanical standards of the gardens.

Horticulturists at Botanicus Perfectus argue that the push to develop proposals has undermined their ability to "exercise independent judgement" and undertake "advanced trade level horticultural duties". Prior to the changes in management's strategy and structure, horticulturists retained some discretion over the propagation of plants. When a plant required repaginating horticulturists could proceed to do so once they had permission from their supervisor. Such permission was often verbal rather than written. A list of plant numbers was issued by the nursery, the supervisor would sign this list, the details of the plants were forwarded to plant records to be entered on computer, and the plants were planted (Public Service Association Delegates, Botanicus Perfectus, 1993, 1994).

This informal approach is no longer possible as the procedures have increasingly become more complex. Horticulturists discuss the acquisition of new plants with their supervisor, they then complete a Plant Propagation Request Form which is forwarded to the horticultural development officer. The development officer checks to see if the plants requested are compatible with landscaping plans for the garden and a number of weeks may pass before a decision is reached. If the decision is favourable the request goes to plant records. The request then goes to the nursery who confirm that they have the relevant plants in stock. The request then returns to records who have to complete tags for the plants. These tags are sent to the horticulturists' supervisor who asks which date horticulturists wish to plant and this information is sent back to plant records. Finally, the plant is planted. Overall, it takes anything between six to ten weeks to put a plant in the ground - a process which has to be undertaken even where vandals have
ripped a plant out of a bed - and is only rushed through where there is a priority. While this system results in better records with more people aware of plant collections in the gardens, it is perceived by horticulturists as overly bureaucratic and a disincentive to forwarding requests for the planting of annuals beds or even for the replacement of gaps in garden beds. Horticulturists are convinced that "with so many fingers in the pie" their suggestions will be stifled (former Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). Propagation is now determined largely by management and the involvement of horticulturists in the decision-making process regarding propagation has declined considerably. Furthermore, under this new approach to repropagation, contact with the records office, a valuable means of maintaining and increasing plant knowledge, has been significantly reduced (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

**Bureaucracy and the Horticultural Labour Process**

Horticulturists argued that the amount of paperwork they had to undertake was excessive, constraining their ability to utilise their horticultural skills. These workers considered themselves skilled craft workers with considerable knowledge of the Garden's collections and stressed their desire to practice their craft rather than being buried under paperwork. This does not mean they opposed some level of bureaucracy. Record keeping helped to keep track of plants, particularly plants afflicted by certain diseases, and improved their ability to curate rare and endangered plants. Neither did horticulturists disagree with the need to document and list plant names in the Garden's collections or the names of fertilisers used for the rose garden. The records enabled them to undertake their horticultural tasks more effectively.

By contrast, horticulturists considered the Curator/Manager's insistence on documenting everything the antithesis of their craft knowledge acquired through
training and years of practical experience which ensures they know when certain
tasks have to be done. For example, they knew that grape vines had to be
pruned in winter, roses in mid-winter as well as crab apple plants which come
from the same family and climactic region. If horticulturists were unsure they
could refer to the garden's extensive library. Overall, horticulturists preferred a
more informal and less bureaucratic approach to work organisation within the
gardens (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

On the whole, horticulturists were not normal public servants in that bureaucracy
and management hierarchies were antithetical to them. They often began
employment at the gardens with idealistic assumptions of what working for an
institution with a world class scientific, botanical and educational reputation would
be like. They were not expecting the regimentation and bureaucracy which has
become a major source of frustration for them (Public Service Association
delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). They conceded that if a new collection is
planted it makes sense to keep a close eye on it and document its progress, but
to apply the same regulations to existing gardens beds was, they insisted,
nonsense. In many cases these beds have existed for 200 years, they have not
changed greatly for much of this time and nor are they likely to change much in
the immediate future. The amount of bureaucracy horticulturists experienced
represents one of the major factors causing disillusionment and frustration to set
in. Many horticulturists came to regard working at Botanicus Perfectus as similar
"...to working at the Tax office but without the shelving" (Public Service
Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

**Career Paths, Performance Appraisal, Training and Communications**

Management claimed changes in human resource policies provided greater
opportunities for career path progression, performance assessment, training and
communications between management and the horticultural workforce.
Limited potential for career progression has historically existed at the Sydney gardens. For example, it had been virtually unheard of for horticultural labourers to progress to the horticulturist level. Management claimed greater potential exists for staff to progress, with extra positions created at levels 7 and 8 in both green keeping and arboriculture. Horticultural labourers were also able to acquire truck driving licences and work to semi-trade level under the agreement (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Career path progression, however, was subject to management prerogative. Management may decide that there is no work to justify a level 6 and refuse to upgrade a level 5 horticulturist. While the performance assessment process enabled horticulturists at level 5 to progress to level 6 of the agreement, for most there was nowhere for them to go after this. It was very difficult for horticulturists to progress from level 6 to level 7 unless a position was available on the higher grade, which occurred only if someone left the gardens and even then the position was advertised externally. Labourers could move from level 3 to level 4 but did not gain access to the duties required to progress to level 5. Therefore, in reality the career path available to the horticultural workforce involved one upward step and then stops (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). As a result, horticulturists claimed that they had little opportunity for career progression.

A further result of the shift towards devolution has been an increase in the responsibility of senior horticulturists for performance appraisal. Workplace management conceded that getting senior horticulturists to participate in assessing their colleagues was difficult and involved a major change in 'culture' (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). Senior horticulturists now have to assess whether horticulturists and horticultural labourers in their teams satisfy the
criteria to progress to the next level of the career path and whether they qualify for the first yearly increment under the enterprise agreement. For horticultural labourers this involves determining whether they should move to level 4 or remain at level 3, while horticulturists are being assessed on their suitability to move from level 5 to level 6 of the agreement. Initially there were complaints by horticulturists seeking progression from level 5 to level 6, that project work undertaken at institutes for technical and further education was not recognised as a proposal for "Collections Management". Management insisted that this was undertaken as part of their horticultural training and therefore represents part of the criteria to get to level 5. Furthermore, many horticultural labourers were refused progression form level 3 to level 4 as they did not have experience or relevant licences to undertake back hoe or truck driving duties (Public Service Association Delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Senior horticulturists were reluctant to accept that they were part of the garden’s management hierarchy. This was highlighted by their refusal to attend management training workshops. Non-technical training includes a 'Team Leader Abilities Program' covering labourers and horticulturists from level 2 to level 11 of the enterprise agreement which emphasised communication between supervisors and horticultural staff (Staff Development Officer, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). A "Performance Management" workshop was also provided for management, supervisors and staff. Half the attendants at the staff workshop were supervisors compelling management to convert it into a supervisors workshop as senior horticulturists refused to consider themselves as part of the management hierarchy. They perceived themselves as workers and were often as vitriolic as other horticultural workers in their criticisms of the actions of management (former Human Resources Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1993).
Senior horticulturists desire to distance themselves from workplace management was heightened by the communication style of the Curator/Manager. Workplace management insisted that it was moving away from the traditionally autocratic approach to the horticultural workforce that had predominated to a more consultative style, central for the success of efforts to decentralise decision-making to horticultural staff (Curator/Manager, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994). Animosity between the workforce and the management style of the Curator/Manager, however, remained. The Curator/Manager was alleged to reprimand those who do not take workplace problems through each rung of the management hierarchy before coming to him. He also expected employees to chase their supervisors and ensure that they carry out the tasks requested of them. These demands had done little to reduce the traditional animosity felt by horticultural staff towards management (Public Service Association delegate, Botanicus Perfectus, 1994).

Conclusion
This paper has explored the impact of a human resource management strategy to devolve responsibility down the line to supervisory management and to provide them with more involvement in the day-to-day planning and management of the garden (Submission, 1991). This strategy was accompanied by a change in the line management structure at Botanicus Perfectus with the appointment of a Curator/Manager and Horticultural Development Officer. However, a range of contradictions between this human resource strategy and the reality experienced by senior horticulturists and horticulturists is evident in this study.

First, senior horticulturists at Botanicus Perfectus resented the time and bureaucracy involved in the preparation of financial budgets which they argued were too prescriptive and inflexible to the requirements of horticultural work given the uncertainties of the weather and potential for vandalism in a public garden.
Therefore pressure to conform to the requirements of an organisation's business strategy may undermine line managers' ability to implement human resource policies. This pressure to implement business strategy emphasises short term outcomes to the detriment of the more long term human resource management goals of employee development (Kirkpatrick et al, 1992: 141) and "Simply ignores the reality that the 'line manager' in the present - day company is becoming, before all else, a budget holder" (Armstrong, 1989: 164 cited in Kirkpatrick et al, 1992: 143). Senior horticulturists' inability to alter these budgets, to make them more relevant, highlights that these line managers lacked both authority and status within the management hierarchy (Lowe, 1992: 143-152).

Second, attempts to train supervisors at Botanicus Perfectus have been frustrated because they refused to consider themselves part of the management hierarchy. The development of these reluctant managers was also constrained by the lack of promotional opportunities available to them. Most progressed solely to the next level of the management hierarchy. The communication style of the Curator/Manager further alienated senior horticulturists from identifying with workplace management. Therefore while line managers were encouraged to develop their subordinate employees, their own development was often given a low priority. In a similar vein, Cockett and Elias (1984: 42) highlight the low emphasis placed in Britain on training line managers as a major problem for British economic performance.

Third, on top of financial budgets, senior horticulturists also resented the time misspent doing quarterly work programs which, they claimed were a bureaucratic exercise which bore little relevance to the reality of horticultural work and were time consuming to prepare and review. These programs further constrained the time senior horticulturists could allocate to their horticultural duties. Therefore, line managers may not be committed to implementing human resource policies as
they often lack resources such as time or adequate finances (Lowe, 1992: 143-152; Kirkpatrick et al, 1992: 143). Line managers may also resent implementing HRM policies which they perceive as having little relevance or benefit for themselves. For example, Kirkpatrick et al (1992: 142) observed line managers resentment at having to implement policies they opposed ranging from appraisals, staff consultations to equal employment opportunity where, at best, they provided "grudging consent".

Fourth, the strategy to devolve responsibility to horticulturists has also backfired. The authority of horticulturists at Botanicus Perfectus was tightly constrained by senior line management. On the one hand horticulturists were encouraged to prepare proposals for the development of the gardens. However these proposals had to progress through a labyrinth of bureaucracy and required the approval of the Horticultural Development Officer and the Curator/Manager, who wanted to ensure no proposal was accepted which contradicted their plans for the development of the garden. This process undermined the involvement of horticulturists in the decision-making process regarding the development of the garden, whilst also constraining their craft skills by reducing the access horticulturists previously enjoyed to plant records.

These findings confirm that gaining the commitment of line management represents a central conundrum for HRM, ensuring that the implementation of HRM policies in practice will be problematic (Guest, 1987: 519) and creating the potential for contradictions between policy and practice to occur (Kirkpatrick et al, 1992: 133). Overall, these senior horticulturists are reluctant line managers. They perceive the changes in management strategy and structure to have diminished rather than enhanced their autonomy to forward proposals for the development of the gardens. Moreover, the responsibility which has been devolved to them to prepare quarterly work programs and financial budgets are
believed to be overly bureaucratic whilst detracting from their ability to practice their craft skills. Finally, senior horticulturists prefer to consider themselves horticultural workers and are reluctant to accept the label of 'management' because of the idiosyncratic actions and communication style of the Curator/Manager. Therefore this study highlights some of the problems of a human resource management strategy which seeks to devolve responsibility 'down the line'. In this case study, employee resistance to the logic of devolution played a key role in hindering such a strategy where the rhetoric of devolution contrasted starkly with a reality of increased control and bureaucracy and where the process of implementing this greater responsibility threatened workers craft knowledge and skills.

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