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HUMAN RESOURCES DIRECTOR

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ONE ON ONE:
JACK PERCY

Jack Percy has worked at Accenture for over 30 years. Now, as chairman and managing director of Accenture Australia and New Zealand, he talks to **Iain Hopkins** about the importance of creative tension, cutting through the 'white noise', and how HR can add value in a complex business world

HR Director: As your win in the Australian HR Awards demonstrates, clearly you place a high priority on the 'people matters' in your business. What are you most proud of?

Jack Percy: I place a very high level of importance on HR matters. We have a whole range of programs, but some of the ones that I'm most proud of include our 'Accent on Parents', which comprises a range of programs within that umbrella. It includes initiatives like 'bring your kids to work day', so your kids can come and see where you disappear to every day, and the environment you work in. We provide a lot of support in the run-up to parenthood through the parental leave period and then getting people back into the business after that. If we allowed the natural drain of parenthood to take its course, that could be quite damaging for us, so we do all we can to keep parents engaged with work. We put a lot of effort into keeping in touch with people while they're on parental leave and bringing them back in a way that they're comfortable with afterwards.

HRD: Obviously you've built up a good rapport with your HR director, Siobhan Gallacher. What do you believe is the secret to building a good relationship with any executive?

JP: My overall philosophy is probably best described as using the creative tension that comes from independence and collaboration. I like to find out what constitutes success for each of the people who work for me, and work with them to make sure that matches up with the definition of organisational success.

But I'm not hugely directive in terms of how they go about executing particular responsibilities. I very much like people to come up with their own ideas while providing air cover, so there's a sense of security but they're not constrained. Then we balance that with collaboration so we don't end up having fiefdoms and silos.

HRD: You mention creative tension. Most CEOs don't like being surrounded by 'yes' men or women. How do you encourage enough dissent but not too much?

JP: I don't need to do anything to encourage dissent; it's always going to happen! We have a very active sense of sharing ideas, and by doing so we come up with better answers. Every two weeks the leadership team holds a meeting. In those meetings anything goes, and by that I mean if you have a dissenting point of view it's best to put it on the table.

So it's very much a sense of there can be dissent but then solidarity. In that room we can disagree with each other, we can argue, we can come up with a solution that resolves the issue and decide what to do next; but outside that room we're all singing from the same hymn sheet.

HRD: What do you expect your HRD to be delivering on?

JP: First and foremost it's on the human capital and diversity strategy, which we've put a lot of work into. This underpins our business strategy.

Then it's tidy management of all the 'operational stuff' you have to do. We have nearly 4,000 employees, so there are all sorts of different employment arrangements. There's no shortage of 'operational stuff' that must be covered.

Thirdly, it's keeping an eye out for precedents that might be being set on individual decisions which, when you look at the individual decision it seems to make sense, but actually it might be opening up a can of worms. It's keeping an eye on the bigger picture.

So that's the HR view of the world, but actually we're running a business, not an HR department. Having a keen understanding of what the business strategy is, and making sure the HR function is configured to support that business strategy, is very important.



Jack on ... collaboration

"Collaboration has been my mantra as a leader for many years. It does not always happen organically, as people get absorbed in the reality of deadlines, targets and performance metrics, coupled with client demands. It's critical to engineer and institutionalise regular opportunities to collaborate, virtually or in person; traditionally via meetings or online channels; or through creative channels such as 'speed dating' – 360 conversations among 38 managing directors in 2.5 hours – as well as experiential simulations to breed discussion."

Finally, sometimes you follow the process and you come up with an answer. It's not necessarily the right answer. It's flipping that and saying, 'we got to this point but actually that's not the right answer for the individual, so let's do something different'. It's having a sense of humanity in the process.

HRD: Do you expect your HRD to bring something different to the table that you might not expect from your other executives? For example, business acumen with a healthy dose of humanity?

JP: If we're going off the rails on that humanity front, I would expect HR to bring us back. But the reality is, all the leadership roles are supervising and running pretty large teams, so if they themselves don't have a pretty good understanding of how to manage and motivate people and do the right things, then we're not going to have much of a business anyway. The whole of our business is a people business, so anyone who gets to the top of it understands what you can and can't do. So while I'd expect the HRD to keep us honest on that front, it's actually not usually a hard job to do it well.

HRD: What do you view as the number one HR-related issue that you are currently facing at Accenture?

JP: Number one is continuing to develop and grow

the next generation of leaders. This has long been an important tenet of the organisation. I've been here since 1983, nearly 31 years, so there's a long tradition of bringing people through and giving them support and training to be successful.

But more than that, we've identified the next group of leaders and we've instituted what we call a Leadership Excellence Program, which is focused entirely on the soft side of leadership skills. We're doing that in conjunction with the Melbourne Business School, and it has received fantastic feedback.

Generation next

The Leadership Excellence Program (LEP) program is a nine-month program for 50 high-potential senior managers and junior managing directors, consisting of three modules (two to three days each) and four small group coaching sessions. Its themes are leading for change, partnering for performance, and adapting for the future. The program's duration and format are intentionally designed to allow time for participants to absorb and test their learnings, and then have a group coaching session to explore how those learnings are being applied and what additional support may be required.

The LEP learning outcomes address five of Accenture's nine leadership competencies:

- leadership authenticity
- executive presence
- operating and leading globally
- leading organisational change
- client relationship building and development

HRD: We often hear about the complexity of running a business today. How do you cut through the 'white noise' and hone in on what's important?

JP: I agree that business seems to be getting more and more complicated. For me, the trick is to boil things down to very simple but not simplistic metrics and messages. You can look at a P&L and it's incredibly complicated, but there will always be two or three things that are important, and those are the elements I focus on.

It's similar with overall messaging about objectives. Individuals will have specific objectives set by their immediate manager, but in my role the focus on a few simple messages helps to cut through. **HRD**