

# HR: Watchmen of an organisation



By Anton Chan

A watchman had numerous roles in ancient civilisations. It wasn't a role that was suited for any individual; the city's life and security depended on them. Duties of a watchman included perching themselves on large watchtowers, standing guard over the city's crops so they would not be stolen while they matured. Others stood on the city walls observing the daily comings and goings within the city gates and observing everyday life of the city.

Overtime, watchmen would grow familiar to the usual activities in the streets, the people, their lifestyles, their habits and their work. They would be considered the most familiar as well, with all that goes on outside of the city gates, and the business transactions of its officials.

Putting all that together, watchmen had three primary roles:

- To protect and preserve the city and its resources
- To ensure people were on the "right paths"
- To observe the external environment

What does the role of a watchman mean in today's modern context? How is the role of HR in organisations today similar to that of an ancient watchman? Are there any parallels? If so, what are the implications?

## To protect and preserve the city and its resources

Like watchmen, HR has the responsibility to highlight any unusual

trends in employee behaviour and turnover trends, and to ensure that the organisation's policies and culture are being adhered to.

Watchmen also had to be sure that the people that they were letting into the city were not enemies in disguise. Failure to do so could result in the city falling prey to espionage or worse. In today's context, HR plays this role in recruitment and selection. That means, the function has the weighty responsibility of ensuring that the people it is recruiting have the necessary knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs) to contribute to the organisation, and are not a deadweight that will simply feed off the organisations' resource pie. In ensuring that this selection process is thorough enough to sieve through the good and the not so good, time and investment are needed to devise suitable methods to accurately test KSAs of prospective employees. However, the caveat is that shouldn't be based on that entirely. Peter Drucker once said, "One cannot just hire a hand; the whole man always comes with it." HR must be wary of the danger of hiring based only on appropriate KSAs to fill a position; it needs to be a judge of a person's character as well; it must make sound assessments of characteristics based on a person's personality and background, against the organisation's culture, and to make a match that will be beneficial to the organisation.

## To ensure people are on the "right paths"

In order to preserve the security of the city, watchmen had to sound out if people weren't doing their jobs, or following their "normal" way of life. In today's context, while HR has a similar responsibility in ensuring that employees do their jobs, HR needs to ensure that well-performing and high-potential employees are channelled properly, and supported by reward systems in place.

Relating back to recruitment, if it is done right, focus and resources can then be shifted to retaining high-performing employees through training and development as well. Humans are always progressing, and we never stop learning. The challenge for HR is to ensure that its training and development programmes are on par with the level of progression of employees and that it caters to all. When the channelling of human capital is done right, it will ultimately lead to the progression of the organisation as a whole.

## In summary...

I believe with this perspective in mind, the key trait required of HR personnel is to be vigilant at all times, and never complacent. Undoubtedly, this is a vital role that cannot be overlooked in sustaining the life of the organisation, which weighs heavily on the shoulders of these watchmen: to protect, preserve and be its guardians.