

# **Managerial Perspectives of Coaching Wrestling**

by Chris Vondruska  
chrisvondruska@hotmail.com  
3/6/08

## *Introduction*

What are the key ingredients to a thriving organization? Is it the capital required to start them? Is it the facilities in which they operate? Or is it the equipment used everyday? Both my research in sport studies and my experience in the sport of wrestling have allowed me to understand how useless these material resources would be without the sufficient human resources. In a business setting human resources are made up of employees and their managers; business can only use these material resources (capital, facilities, and equipment) with their employees and managers who convert them into wealth.<sup>1</sup> In a sport setting (such as wrestling) the human resources are the athletes and coaches; these coaches resemble managers in the sense that their major function is to manage their athletes. In most organizations sports or not, human resources are a unique resource and are all that matter because it is the people that make the organizations run. Without the athletes and coaches, the facilities and equipment would be useless. Furthermore, with athletes and coaches that lack the characteristics required for such positions, the activity would go nowhere.

Former head football coach at The Ohio State University, Woody Hayes, was fond of the saying “you win with people”. Perhaps he was speaking accurately to say so, in the case of The Ohio State football program’s support, which not only includes players

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<sup>1</sup> Chelladurai, P. (1999). Human Resource Management in Sport and Recreation. 1st Edition. (p. 1)

and coaches, but fans as well. However, in my experiences and studies in the sport of wrestling, not only do you need people, but you need the right people. Everyone with direct influence to the organization should be on the same page and have similar goals with that of the organizational leader. In the summer of 2006, newly hired head wrestling coach at The Ohio State University, Tom Ryan, found himself in need of the “right” people to achieve a goal, to transform a good team into a great one. He began with forming a staff of qualified coaches. Five coaches were injected into the program, all varying in weight in order to facilitate the athletes’ training. Perhaps more importantly, those chosen were similar in the sense that they all expressed great interest in Ohio State wrestling, as well have proven their dedication to the sport through previous coaching experience. Coach Ryan then notified all returning and incoming wrestlers of the staff changes and sent all student-athletes the book, *From Good to Great*, by Jim Collins.

The Author, Jim Collins is a student and teacher of great enduring companies as noted in his biography.<sup>2</sup> His primary studies in the book are how good organizations thrive and eventually grow into the great ones that remain in their respective industries. The message that Tom Ryan was attempting to transfer to the team was that “Ohio State wrestling, just like some of the major fortune 500 companies, is a business, only on a much smaller scale, but not a less important scale.”<sup>3</sup> He thought the book would give all members of the team a good idea of what to expect from the coaching staff while trying to motivate the wrestlers for the upcoming season. The coaching staff assembled by Ryan expected a maintained greatness from all the human resources surrounding the program.

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<sup>2</sup> Collins, Jim “Biography of Jim Collins” 15 February 2008.  
<[http://www.jimcollins.com/pdf/JimCollins\\_Biography.pdf](http://www.jimcollins.com/pdf/JimCollins_Biography.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Direct quote from Tom Ryan given through email interview 4/10/2007

Coaches and athletes involved with wrestling can gain valuable insights from the literature in human resource practices. Coach Ryan recognized early on that while all the amenities of his new job were nice, it would not make the team great. Only the right people can make any organization great. In this paper I will relate the sport of wrestling to human resources. The sections are divided similarly to the works of P. Chelladurai (2006) in direct relation to the sport of wrestling. These insights I give are not meant to be taken as scientific research, but merely advice from my research of human resources in direct relation to the sport of wrestling.

### *Values*

The term value in a sport's setting in general refers to a belief of what ought to be (e.g. there should be no emphasis on winning in sport). These values however will greatly influence the long-term goals and decisions made by the individual.<sup>4</sup> Wrestling is not unique in the sense that the sport holds similar values of all other sports in the United States, including: success, competition, continual striving, deferred gratification, and perhaps most important hard work.<sup>5</sup> Hard work is the value that is stressed, and has been ingrained in aspiring wrestler's minds, most notably present in former University of Iowa head coach Dan Gable's coaching philosophy.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps the most common value in sport is success. But what is success? And how does one come about achieving such success? Success in my opinion is achieving the goals set forth by the individual, so much so that the individual receives an intrinsic

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<sup>4</sup> Brunkan, R.J. (1991). Psychological assessment in career development. In C.P. Hansen and K.A. Conrad (Eds.), A handbook of psychology assessment in business.(pp. 237-257)

<sup>5</sup> Eitzen D.S. and Sage, G.H. (1986). Sociology of North American sport (3<sup>rd</sup> edition).

<sup>6</sup> Dan Gable is a legendary former head wrestling coach at The University of Iowa. He has spread his coaching philosophy through his books on the sport as well as coaching wrestling champions who go on to be coaches.

reward or satisfaction directly from the activity. Wrestlers are encouraged to set goals early on in their careers, often which require some type of plan of action for achieving these goals. In general athletes trying to improve at a sport and move up in various class levels recognize that more time and work at the sport will be required. The definition of hard work differs from sport to sport as well as business to business; however it is common in the sense that it requires feats greater than the competition. In wrestling, competition could be anyone training in the sport at the same weight class; therefore it is difficult to know exactly what the competition is doing at all times. Hence in wrestling, it is more effective to focus on individual training rather than the competition. Dan Gable embodied the value of hard work so much so that he formed it into an attitude. His attitude was that there was no way he was going to lose, nor have his athletes lose from lack of effort in training. Therefore he trained 7 hours each day during his years of competition, and presumed that no other athlete could train as hard as him, and that he would outwork his opponents throughout every position of every match. He set goals for himself that were attainable only by constantly training everyday, and he was successful in attaining his goals by winning the Olympics and dominating everyone in his weight class.<sup>7</sup>

Coaches such as Gable encourage wrestlers to have terminal (societal vs. personal) and instrumental (moral vs. competence) values<sup>8</sup>, and then to prioritize these values throughout their careers. Terminal values in wrestling can be organized into personal values and team values. Personally, wrestlers value winning their matches; beyond winning individually; they also value the team victory during dual meets and

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<sup>7</sup> Ferguson, H. (1990) The Edge: The Guide to Fulfilling Dreams, Maximizing Success and Enjoying a Lifetime of Achievement. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition

<sup>8</sup> Chelladurai, P. (2006). Human Resource Management in Sport and Recreation. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (pp. 82-90)

tournaments. Although wrestling is an individual sport, the team aspect promotes group encouragement and internal competition which allows the athletes to individually strive to excel in the sport. If wrestlers only valued what was important to them, they perhaps would not get as far as they are potentially able to. For example if an athlete has a minor injury he may not compete in practice to allow time to heal, however he may think of helping their team and wrestle with the injury, continue training, ultimately helping himself and the team get better.

Instrumental values in wrestling can be organized into practice and competitions. In practice everyone must be held accountable for their training. Therefore, if people are slacking on the team, they must be called out and redirected for the team to function properly. In this situation they can be called out by a coach or a team member, both of which should aid in the productivity of the athlete. As far as competitions, everyone is expected to compete to the best of their abilities every time they step on to an athletic field, which carries over to all sports. This alignment of ability is crucial and if they are not aligned mental training needs to be implemented. Ultimately, commitment and sacrifices are put into athletics for a reason, to show your ability at competitions and do your best. The values in sport carry over to abilities when improvements in practice and competitions are the goals of the individual.

### *Abilities*

Wrestling is a sport which requires open psychomotor abilities which are learned and improved by engaging in the activity.<sup>9</sup> In my opinion, wrestling is designed for athletes who lack size or certain abilities. Ball sports such as baseball, basketball, and

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<sup>9</sup> According to Chelladurai (1999) psychomotor abilities are grouped into: muscular strength, cardiovascular endurance, and movement quality. All physical skills that are trained in athletics.

football all require hand-eye coordination, which I argue are prerequisites of certain sports that some people simply have difficulty with. Wrestling does not require this feature, which may lead to interest in the sport of wrestling when lacking this ability. On the other hand wrestling does have similar psychomotor characteristics which coincide with these “ball” sports, like explosive strength and reaction time, although not easily transferred from sport to sport due to position differences.

Wrestling is unique in the sense that a functional team must have athletes on it that vary in weight. In high school the range is from 103 pounds to 285 pounds, a range which encompasses most high school males. In sports like basketball and football, coaches are often looking for a certain height and weight of individuals as a prerequisite to their abilities. In wrestling the coaches can go straight to looking at the abilities in three basic categories: muscular strength, cardiovascular endurance, and movement quality. It is standard for a wrestler to lack all of these qualities in the beginning stages of their careers. This makes the coach’s job a little more difficult, but at the same time more rewarding when they are able to successfully shape a young person with very low abilities into one with abilities in all three areas. Coaches will train their wrestlers muscularly by weight training and utilize balance exercises for muscle endurance, both of which will make the athlete stronger. Cardiovascular endurance is tested every day in the gruesome practice room as well as preseason runs to get in shape. Movement quality is perhaps the most difficult acquired ability, but ideally is taken care of within the first month of practice by teaching basic drills in all positions of wrestling. While this can be acquired in a quick amount of time this quality continues to improve over years of experience.

Wrestling is an excellent example for those taking the behavioralist point of view<sup>10</sup> in issues over ability because it is a sport that no matter how inherently gifted a person is it will not make up for the rigorous practice and training required in wrestling. Preferred prerequisites in the sport include: total body quickness, strength, power for explosive movements, agility (rapid changes in body position), flexibility, coordination, and cardiovascular training.<sup>11</sup> A person can be gifted in the sense that they are big and strong; however in wrestling the person will have no real advantage because their opponents will generally weigh the same as them. The sport is about mastering the three psychomotor abilities, and the only way to do that is from constantly practicing and training in those areas. In the end because of the physical nature of the sport wrestling will never attract as many athletes as other sports; nevertheless exceptional athletes now compete as wrestlers and more are on the way.<sup>12</sup>

### *Leadership*

Leadership is a characteristic desired by colleges as well as businesses when accepting applicants. The sport of wrestling demands leadership qualities from both the coach and the individual athletes. Coaches operate under the dimensions of leader behavior in sport<sup>13</sup>, while athletes operate under dimensions stemming from leading by example.

*Leaders are molded from the highest character and are generally the hardest workers on the team. They're the first to come to practice and the last ones to*

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<sup>10</sup> Chelladurai, P. (2006). Human Resource Management in Sport and Recreation. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition. (p. 54) "Regarding the heritability issue, the behaviorists hold that a person acquires ability through experience and learning and not because of any inherent factors."

<sup>11</sup> Brown, J. (2000). Sports Talent: How to identify and develop outstanding athletes. (p. 12-18)

<sup>12</sup> Brown, J. (2000). Sports Talent: How to identify and develop outstanding athletes. (p. 276)

<sup>13</sup> Chelladurai, P. (1999). Human Resource Management in Sport and Recreation. 1st Edition. (p. 163). 5 basic dimensions are used: training and instruction, social support, positive feedback, democratic behavior, and autocratic behavior.

*leave. During practice, they lead by example with their mouths closed, concentrating hard. They understand the team's goals so they know what has to be done. They realize that practice is precious preparation time for the real thing – the game.*<sup>14</sup>

Wrestling coaches at any level need all dimensions of leader behavior in sports to be successful (training and instruction, social support, positive feedback, democratic behavior, and autocratic behavior).<sup>15</sup> The importance of training is stressed by coaches to give the wrestlers a mindset throughout the season. It is crucial for the athletes to know what exactly is expected of them and what being a part of their wrestling program entails. Coaches may come across individual issues within the team which a coach must deal with, thus having social support. Coaches must also have a balance between autocratic and democratic behavior in the practice room for the wrestlers. Constantly having a coach run practice the same day in and day out may lead to burning out the wrestlers or boring them, which can yield disengaged athletes on the team, some of which may quit. At the same time having no structure to daily workouts can lead to wrestlers being out of shape and having low skill levels, which most likely will yield many losses.

From my experiences in wrestling I see that coaches will often recognize that different parts of the season will have different levels of coach involvement during practice. At the beginning of the season coaches need to set up the training regimen, and most likely stress instruction as well as conditioning for the athletes. During the season coaches may recognize athletes getting worn out from lack of independence in training, which the coach may respond by having semi-structured practices or periodic practices without structure, both of which the coaches will watch and evaluate the wrestlers. The

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<sup>14</sup> Ferguson, H. (1990) The Edge: The Guide to Fulfilling Dreams, Maximizing Success and Enjoying a Lifetime of Achievement. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition p. 5-17

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

end of the season is usually most important with the eve of conference, state, and national championships nearing; here coaches will use autocratic behavior because for the most part they know how to properly prepare their athletes for these competitions. Throughout the season autocratic behavior is important for coaches to have, but it is equally important for the athletes to have autocratic behavior in their independent training sessions.

Wrestlers may or may not be leaders of a team depending on their individual dedication and attitude toward the sport. The training regimen expected by the coaches is strictly a minimum in wrestling. A successful coach will properly prepare their wrestlers to compete at their current level. However, a successful athlete must go beyond the coach's training and induce an autocratic behavior outside of normal practice time to ensure success. This is demonstrated by morning or late night workouts not scheduled by the coaches. A leader in wrestling is one who outworks his opponents; the only way to do so is by putting in more work prior to competitions. A leader cannot emerge from those simply following the coach's order. Along with immense dedication to training an athlete must also obtain a positive attitude which can be transferred to the rest of the team. This attitude must also motivate others to train harder yielding more athletes to go beyond the coaches expectations. The wrestler will often do this by setting forth goals throughout the season congruent with the teams' goals. With these values of leadership in high school and college, these young wrestlers will be prepared for life after college and be able to obtain jobs with the leadership qualities ingrained in their systems.

## *Motivation*

“Motivation is the driving force behind great achievements in wrestling, sports, academics, professional careers, or any pursuit where work is required”.<sup>16</sup> With the choices of raw talent and self-motivation, coaches in any sport would choose the athlete who is self-motivated to put in the work, get the job done, and maximize his or her talents. Motivations in wrestling differ from person to person; however, most successful wrestlers have similar motivations which are crucial to the sport. One of these motivations is performance, a general desire to perform with intrinsic rewards in mind. Wrestlers with extrinsic rewards in mind (medal, trophy, or media attention) “lack the drive to do what’s necessary to develop the skills and conditioning that’s required to win on a consistent basis.”<sup>17</sup> In the case of wrestling and nearly all amateur sports, the intrinsic rewards are generally more satisfying and more prevalent than extrinsic rewards. A wrestler should recognize the only way to receive these rewards is in competition, and the higher level of the opponent the higher level of reward. An obvious way to achieve an intrinsic reward (those rewards satisfying a person internally) is by winning and a great way to better the chances of winning comes from the effort put in during practice time. Great effort comes from constant practice and could lead to many wins, but wins are not guaranteed simply from effort. The effort will be connected to the reward more frequently when the performance is the display of the absolute best efforts. Win or lose, if an athlete competes at his/her best the intrinsic reward should be present. If an athlete’s efforts are not congruent to the performance on days of competition, he/she will need to

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<sup>16</sup> Gable, D. (1999) Coaching Wrestling Successfully p. 23

<sup>17</sup> Gable, D. (1999) Coaching Wrestling Successfully p. 24

focus training mentally with the coaches and develop a positive attitude to overcome the pressures of competition.

Why do amateur athletes (like wrestlers) compete at such a high level with no extrinsic rewards in sight? The primary reason I see is the motivation for intrinsic rewards outweighs that of the extrinsic rewards in the sport. The only extrinsic rewards that I see coming from wrestling are scholarships to compete in college or some type of medal or trophy which comes from individual events, all of which are rewards that could possibly motivate athletes. Clearly the scholarship is more valuable. Still, if it is the only reward in mind, the success of the individual will be very limited because the lack of intrinsic motivation. In the other case, perhaps a trophy or a gold medal means something, but without the tangible received from the event the athlete is the same person, and should feel the same sense of accomplishment.

Unquestionably it is the intrinsic rewards coming from performance in the activity that motivate wrestlers and amateur athletes. When a match is completed in wrestling the referee claims one person the winner of the match signified by raising their hand; for most this is the best part of the match and a key intrinsic reward for wrestlers. An athlete not getting his/her hand raised at the end of a match receives almost no intrinsic reward. The fact that some wrestlers learn from their mistakes when they lose could lead to more intrinsic rewards, thus gaining from the defeat.

A wrestler has various options of action when dealing with a loss; the effort can be increased, decreased, or remain the same. Obviously the effort should be increased when incurring a loss. First, however, the athlete must admit their fault and go to work on ways to prevent similar mistakes. Increasing the effort could mean various actions which

boil down to muscular training, cardiovascular training, movement training, or even mental training when performance and effort do not coincide. An athlete could decide that wrestling is not the sport they want to pursue and quit, thus decreasing efforts all together. This is sad and often a problem in the lower levels of the sport as young athletes cannot properly cope with a loss, because the only person to blame is themselves. On a positive note, athletes can learn how to handle wins and losses from the sport of wrestling. An athlete that has no desire to improve in the sport could simply remain training at the same level because they are satisfied with their performance. A person could argue that time constraints may prohibit a person from increasing their training; however the increased effort does not always have to mean increased time. A person could vary their training to include more weight training when they are outsized by many of their opponents, while decreasing their movement training when the skills are where they need to be. The level of intensity could also be increased which would make the effort more efficient and eventually effect the performance. Generally all of these training variations would be the coaches' obligations to help the wrestler improve.

### *Satisfaction*

Satisfaction in the sport of wrestling is different depending on the level of competitiveness. Noticeably as one moves up in skill or age levels, the more satisfaction is related to winning. I recognize that the facets of satisfaction are important to all people involved with the program rather than just the individual. The coaches' satisfaction is directly effected by the athletes' satisfaction, both in training as well as competition.

In individual sports such as wrestling, a unique factor is that the athlete has almost complete control over the performance, with the right training, effort, and general

abilities. There is no teammate to blame when a wrestler comes off the mat, with the possible caveat that the teammate could have pushed them harder in the practice room. Nor can an individual blame a coach that has done their job in preparation for competition; again the exception may be that a coach could have done a better job in the training process. The individual is ultimately in control of the situation and the only person to blame is himself/herself. Therefore the individual satisfaction of a wrestler depends upon only the athlete themselves. A win may lead to great satisfaction, while at the same time it may lead to little satisfaction as mistakes were most likely made. In the case of a loss the athlete may feel extreme dissatisfaction. On the contrary, perhaps an athlete did the best possible with the training available and is satisfied with the performance thus eventually motivating the individual to continue to improve in the sport.

At the beginning of his freshman year in college, Dan Gable experienced this extreme dissatisfaction while training with Bob Buzzard, an already experienced college wrestler at the time. On their final day of summer training, Buzzard wanted to prove that Gable still had a ways to go in order to be successful. This training session most likely stayed in Gable's mind for some time, because it drove him to much success and satisfaction.

*After Buzzard finished with Gable that night, Dan fell to the mat crying tears of anger. Right then Gable recalls, "I vowed I wouldn't ever let anyone destroy me again. I was going to work at it everyday, so hard that I would be the toughest guy in the world. By the end of practice, I wanted to be physically tired, to know that I'd been through a workout. If I wasn't tired, I must have cheated somehow, so I stayed a little longer."<sup>18</sup>*

Wrestling coaches witness their athletes daily in training as well as competition, and satisfaction levels change according to their performance. Coaches recognize when

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<sup>18</sup> Ferguson, H. (1990) The Edge: The Guide to Fulfilling Dreams, Maximizing Success and Enjoying a Lifetime of Achievement. 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition p. 2-35: Dan Gable had the courage to succeed.

their athletes are ready for practice and come with the mindset of becoming a better wrestler, leading to satisfaction within the coaching staff. When coaches have unmotivated athletes who go through the motions on a daily basis the coach can be left with dissatisfaction and possibly looking to coach another team. During competitions the coaches generally have expectations of each wrestler which can be obtained by the athletes on the team. When the expectations are barely met or not achieved the level of satisfaction is relatively low for the coaches as they expect their wrestlers to compete at a higher level than they train. Athletes outperforming the expectations of the coaches will have satisfaction and cause satisfaction for the coaches alike for the success and improvement of the individual.

### *Commitment*

Commitment is yet another feature in the sport of wrestling and is a category required for the success of the individual as well as the future of the sport. As more and more wrestlers start at a young age, each year improving in the sport, they develop a commitment to the sport which can be caused by various factors. An athlete can be generally happy with the outcomes of the sport and have an affective commitment that last throughout their time as a competitor. A wrestler can have no emotional attachment, but have a sense of duty or obligation to continue on the sport for the good of the team or even themselves. Yet time after time wrestlers feel the sense of being locked into the sport of wrestling because it often leaves little time for other activities, making them continuance committed. Only when a person aligns himself/herself with the teams' mission and goals are they considered to be normatively committed.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>19</sup>Chelladurai, P. (2006). Human Resource Management in Sport and Recreation. 1st Edition. (p.265-270)

The three bases of commitment as previously stated are: affective commitment, continuance commitment, and normative commitment. When an individual feels attached to an organization by feelings of pleasure, loyalty, and warmth they are affectively committed to the organization. A person's commitment may also be based on continuance in an activity; if a person has put a lot of personal sacrifice and time, they often look to continue with the commitment because of the lack of opportunity to change (continuance commitment). The third component of organizational commitment is normative commitment; here a person is attached to the goals, values, and the mission of the organization. This differs from continuance commitment in the sense that it does not necessarily fluctuate with personal calculation of inducements or sunk costs.<sup>20</sup>

Personally my wrestling career has had points of affective commitment, continuance commitment, as well as normative commitment.<sup>21</sup> When I started in the sport improving at a very high rate at a young age I was generally happy and had an affective commitment for the sport. As I began to get burned out in the sport before high school I felt a sense of obligation to continue with the sport to help the team (normative commitment). Starting off in high school, at a very competitive school, not making the starting line-up left me unmotivated; but I felt trapped in the sport as I was continuance committed. My commitment soon changed after my first year of high school back to affective commitment as I again became emotionally attached with the sport. College wrestling was a big jump for me and as I struggled to start my first year, I felt obligated to stay with the sport since I was on scholarship (continuance committed). Finally in 2006 as I graduated from Hofstra University my commitment level to competition in the

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

sport fell, and decided to continue with the sport as a coach to help the sport grow (continuance committed). With the new opportunity at my feet to complete my last year of eligibility at The Ohio State University I decided to be whole heartedly committed to the sport to take advantage of the opportunity that has recently expired. The commitment level for all involved with a program searching for greatness should be normatively committed to that program.

### *Conclusion*

Needless to say there are many other aspects of human resources which need to be examined in the sport of wrestling. The categories of values, abilities, leadership, motivation, satisfaction, and commitment all have one central feature in common: they all stress the idea of hard work. Hard work is a value; hard work is required to master athletic abilities; hard work is a characteristic of leaders; hard work is directly stemmed from motivated individuals; hard work yields success; and hard work demands time and commitment. The athletes and coaches that stress and put in the hard work are the ones who win, it's that simple. It is not the coach with the biggest office who obtains success, nor is it the individual or team with the largest facilities.

Jim Collins, Dan Gable, and Tom Ryan would all agree that human resources are the backbone to great organizations. Collins has served as a teacher to hundreds of CEO's of corporations and understands the value of a marquee employee, but does not mention the need for machines in any of his texts. Gable gives a brief outlay of his wrestling room in Coaching Wrestling Successfully, but does not credit any of his success to it. Ryan is proof that greatness does not come from material resources, having success at two schools with drastic budget differences. Clearly in sport or business, only the

combination of the right human resources will make an organization function successfully.