

# A New Direction:

## How One HR Leader Set the Stage for Change at Maricopa Community Colleges

**N**ikki Jackson, vice chancellor of human resources for Maricopa Community College District, is a change agent in the truest sense of the word. When she joined the nation's largest community college system in December 2010, the HR function was in disarray. There was no sense of collaboration between and among the district HR office and the HR offices of the 10 individual colleges, no sense of stability, no real direction and no solid, sustained leadership.

But Jackson was undaunted, and immediately set out to completely transform Maricopa's HR enterprise. The change that she has brought about in just 18 months is awe inspiring. Under her leadership, Maricopa's HR organization has become almost unrecognizable from what it was just a year and a half ago. And she's only just begun.

## Q Let's start at the beginning. Where was Maricopa's HR organization when you took the helm in 2010?

**A** It was disjointed. It was divisive. It was transactional and compliance driven and not much else. There was no unified voice to govern the function and practice of HR, and there was no understanding of what the role of HR ought to be. The organizational structure was antiquated. The relationship between HR at the district office and HR at the individual colleges was strained at best, volatile at worst.

We were swimming in cumbersome, rule-oriented policies that added no value whatsoever. There was no model around consultative guidance, no academic or experiential orientation around how to be a consultant and how to help people get to "yes." The answer a customer got to any given question on any given day depended almost entirely upon who answered the phone or who replied to the e-mail.

For a number of years there had been no permanent leader — only a succession of interim CHROs. With no permanent leader, there was no one to set the direction and tone of HR; no one to articulate a vision for the department; no one to champion resource allocation. HR was very much its own little silo, in no way working in furtherance of the overall mission, vision, values and strategic goals of Maricopa Community Colleges (MCC).

## Q That sounds like a lot to "fix." Where did you start?

**A** When I came on board, I noticed two buckets of work. First, it was clear that HR needed its own healing and resurrection. It needed clarity on its goals and clarity on its role in support of Maricopa's goals. It needed a sense of stability in terms of leadership and it needed stronger connections one to another (the district office and the college HR departments). And then there was this whole other set of needs that wasn't being met, and that was what was needed *from* HR.

So my job coming in was to first and foremost focus on what HR needed for HR so that it could be relevant

and useful moving forward. And after we got ourselves straightened out, we could then turn our attention to redeveloping and enhancing our products, services and tools.

## Q What are some of the changes you've spearheaded thus far?

**A** The first thing I addressed when I got here was role clarity — who we are, what we do, why it matters. I formed a working group of HR employees (not managers, and this was by design; I believe that to accurately define who and what we need to be, we need the input of individual contributors — those working most closely with our customers). This working group was instrumental in helping me to create some language around role clarity.

Out of these group discussions emerged HR's new role statement:

“It was clear that HR needed its own healing and resurrection.”

“HR will provide knowledge, counsel and services to help Maricopa Community Colleges attract, develop and retain a talented and diverse workforce.” It's very simple and very straightforward, but we needed this statement to ensure that we know what it is we're expected to do and to make sure we're all on the same page, all the time. In support of this role statement, we also created six guiding principles around working collaboratively, fostering relationships, building trust, promoting inclusiveness, encouraging innovation and advocating for professional development. We spent much of last year orienting our HR folks around this role statement and these guiding principles, and they are now the first basis on which we rest our yeses and nos (with policies and rules being secondary).

We also last year launched a “IHR” campaign, driving home the fact that, across the entire MCC district, we are one HR organization. We've even got posters, buttons, t-shirts and those kitschy foam fingers!

It was also important to me to remedy the lack of leadership stability that had plagued this HR organization for years. To that end, all of the senior-level director roles are now filled (many of which had been vacant and/or transient for many, many years). The individuals chosen

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for these positions were chosen as much for their ability to model “transformation” as they were for their HR skills and acumen.

Additionally, I’ve worked to redefine and ramp up intentional ways for HR to connect with one another. First, I formed an HR Operations Council, which consists of HR leaders and individual contributors who meet monthly to delve into a tactical HR issue that has been “on the radar” but has never been addressed (examples: creating exit interviews or an onboarding website). This team is responsible for identifying projects, creating plans and coming up with ways to execute these plans.

Second, I created the HR Extended Leadership Team, wherein I and my leaders at the district office meet once a quarter for half a day with HR leaders at the separate colleges. We spend two hours on our own development and two hours discussing a strategic HR issue.

Finally, as it relates to connections, the HR structure underwent a significant reorganization last year (the first one in decades). We created four centers of excellence, all of which report up through me — HR Administration, whose responsibilities include strategic staffing, compensation, benefits, payroll ... the “guts” of HR, if you will; Employee and Organizational Learning, responsible for leadership development, succession planning, career pathing and wellness; Center for HR Innovation, Strategy and Planning (CHRISP), which serves as a consultant to the HR function to ensure that our products, services, offerings and behaviors reconcile with our role statement and guiding principles; and the Center for HR Solutions, which is the strategic support model for the colleges and is where our HR consultants, HR generalists and employee relations folks reside.

**Q Has it been difficult to bring everyone on board with this massive HR overhaul?**

**A** The concept has been widely accepted. Most folks don’t dispute the need for this change. But I think where the consternation and uneasiness emerge is in thinking about what is really needed to sustain this new model, and that is widespread behavioral and cultural change. And we all know that’s the hard part. The truth of the matter is, we can prop up infrastructure

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**Nikki Jackson** has served as chief human resources officer at Maricopa Community College District (the largest community college system in the country) since December 2010. Prior to this appointment, she served as cabinet secretary for personnel for the state of Kentucky, where she had the distinction of being the youngest cabinet secretary and first African-American woman to head the cabinet in Kentucky’s history. She has 15 years of human resources experience, including private-sector positions with Norton Healthcare, Philip Morris USA, Georgia-Pacific Corporation and ADP.

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and set in motion the process for change, but unless we have willing vessels to work with — folks that are ready to challenge their own mental models and assumptions and think differently about how they contribute — we'll be spinning our wheels. It's taking time, but we're getting there.

## Q So what's next?

**A** You know, it's funny when people ask me this, because my answer is always, "Now the change begins!" And the next comment from them is usually "What do you mean begins?!"

My first year at MCC was really about removing obstacles and breaking down barriers so that in the years to come

we can really accelerate the transformation of the HR organization into a must-have, value-added partner. Our plans for the next three to five years include expanding interest-based negotiations; design and implementation of a new e-performance model; revamping/simplifying our hiring process; drastically overhauling our classification and compensation structure (we currently have 1,900 job descriptions and we're looking to cut that number in half); developing game plans for succession planning and career pathing (both of which are new to MCC); creating an HR intranet and an employee intranet; establishing an executive coaching network; and implementing a new wellness program.

Certainly there's no shortage of work to be done, and we've got our hands full, to be sure. But I can't wait to see what the future holds for this HR organization! 

## Center for HR Innovation, Strategy and Planning

Maricopa Community College District's Center for HR Innovation, Strategy and Planning (CHRISP) was developed by Vice Chancellor of Human Resources Nikki Jackson to serve as a consultant to the Maricopa Community Colleges' HR function. CHRISP is strategically internally focused on HR best-practice benchmarking and research, competency building and staff development, strategic planning, procedure development, web/online solutions, communications both within HR and those coming from HR, infrastructure and budget management, and branding. It also helps the overall HR organization to ensure it remains aligned with its guiding principles and role statement. While its primary customer is Maricopa HR, CHRISP also keeps a focus on national, global, technical and other HR trends to help the Maricopa HR community connect to and make standard the best practices and resources for its employees.

"For years at Maricopa Community Colleges, we had asked our HR people to be all things to all people," says CHRISP Director Josh Mackey. "The best technical experts, the best communicators, the best planners, the best researchers, the best customer service agents, the best future forecasters. With the creation of CHRISP, we have been able to alleviate some of that role confusion and enable our HR functional areas to have a more laser focus on their areas of expertise and on serving our organizational customers."

*CHRISP was the recipient of the CUPA-HR Western Region's 2012 Excellence in HR Practices Award. Thanks to the generous support of VALIC, Maricopa Community College District received a \$750 contribution to its endowment. If you're attending the CUPA-HR Annual Conference and Expo in Boston this month and would like to learn more about CHRISP, sit in on Josh Mackey's concurrent session, "Creating an HR Department That Serves HR."*