

## Insights and Outcomes



### HRM INSIGHT 2.1 The story of Sue Ridgebridge

Students are strongly recommended to read the section in Tony Watson's (2002) book which contains the account Sue Ridgebridge gave to him as part of his research into HRM and what it means to different people.

There are several points that can be made about the story and they are not all about HR!

- Many people who 'teach' HR do so by using textbooks and simply present what authors say as though the only requirement was to summarize and present what others have said. There is often very little questioning of the material or trying to make sense of it—students are simply required to accept what is presented. This is not learning, however, and the whole thrust of our book is based on the belief that students can only engage in meaningful learning about HR if they break free from this kind of dependency and passivity—just as Sue did!
- The second point is about language and meaning. In one sense HR, HRM, people management are simply terms we use to describe something else; in this case an organizational activity and responsibility associated with the employment and management of people. HR/HRM doesn't exist in any physical form—you can't 'see' it, weigh it, or feel it—the best we can do is to try to describe it using language. Unfortunately, this can result in confusion about what words and terms mean, given that people can often attribute different meanings to the same words and terms. Sue's problem was that her tutors were using HRM ambiguously, both as a general and delegated area of responsibility and in its departmental form. She wasn't taking issue with these two meanings; her argument was with the tutors who failed to explain which one *they* were using. And even more worrying for her was the way they seemed to switch meanings randomly.
- The final point relates to differences in the way people are managed at work—and both can also reflect the characteristics in the two ways HR can be conceptualized. The debate about the 'differences' between HRM and personnel management is well documented in the book and elsewhere. From our point of view there are important differences in ideology, practices, and objectives in the way people are managed and these are constantly evolving as organizations seek to adapt to their environments. The important point is however what words we use to describe these practices—what is actually done in practice. It becomes a little disingenuous to claim to be practising HRM when in fact the reality is rather different. On the other hand, an organization that seeks to practise some of the things associated with HRM can still use the description personnel management. So, words and terms aren't really that important but what people actually and achieve are.



### REFERENCE

Watson, T.J. (2002) *Organising and Managing Work*, FT/Prentice Hall.