

From Possibility to Realization: The Central Role of Human Resources in Making Things Happen

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Abstract

Human resources are a unique resource, a capital, and a strategic driver. Among all organizational resources, human resources occupy a unique and irreplaceable position. While financial, technological, informational, and material resources make the achievement of organizational goals possible, it is human resources that convert these possibilities into realization. This paper introduces and elaborates a critical conceptual distinction: possibility versus happening. Drawing from theories such as Resource-Based View, Human Capital Theory, System Theory, and Agency Theory, philosophical reasoning, and illustrative analogies, this article establishes the superior role of human resources in transforming possibility into happening. The argument reinforces the strategic importance of Human Resource Management as the primary enabler of organizational success.

Key Words: Human Resources, Human Resource Management, Personnel, Possibility, Realization

Introduction

We are all human beings, and when we work in organizations or for organizations, we are called or identified as Human Resource (HR) or Human Resources (HR). Regardless of type, size, geographical location, and nature of industry, all organizations strive to achieve their goals by deploying various limited resources such as money, machinery, materials, methods, time, information, and others. These resources are undoubtedly essential for achieving organizational goals which may include employee productivity, cost-effectiveness, profits, market share, legal compliance, customer satisfaction, supplier satisfaction, employee satisfaction, owner satisfaction, sustainability etc. However, a deeper reflection reveals a fundamental truth: they are inherently inert. They do not act on their own. They lack the ability or strength to move on their own. Only human beings, who are human resources, possess the capacity to activate and utilize all other resources.

This article presents and analyzes the proposition that:

“Other resources make things possible. Only human resources make things happen.” (Opatha, 2009, p.17).

This statement, first introduced in Opatha (2009), captures the true essence of HRM and its unparalleled importance to organizational success. Hence, this conceptual research article is an attempt to explore this statement. Drawing from theories such as Resource-Based View (RBV), Human Capital Theory (HCT), System Theory (ST), and Agency Theory (AT), philosophical reasoning, and illustrative analogies, the article expands and justifies this proposition. It positions HRM not merely as a support function, but as the central strategic discipline in all forms of organized human activity.

Nature of Organizational Resources

Organizational success and progress of success depend on how efficiently and effectively an organization utilizes its available limited resources. These typically include:

1. Financial Resources: money, credit, and investments.
2. Physical Resources: buildings, equipment, raw materials.
3. Technological Resources: machinery, tools, and digital systems.
4. Informational Resources: data, knowledge, and planning systems.
5. Intellectual Property Resources: patents, trademarks, copyrights, and trade secrets which project innovations and brands.
6. Time Resource: totally perishable, irreversible, and non-replaceable resource.
7. Human Resources: individuals with attitudes, competencies, behaviours, and personal character.

While all these resources are essential for managers to achieve their organizational goals, a critical differentiation must be made: only human resources have unique characteristics which are missing from all other resources. Opatha (2009, p. 8) writes: “*The overwhelming significance of HR is due to its unique characteristics, which are:*

1. *It is animate, active and living.*
2. *It has the ability to think, feel and react.*
3. *Its value appreciates with the passage of time (because of experience, training etc.).*
4. *It has the ability to influence on determining its cost (pay).*
5. *It has the ability to organize (as unions, teams etc.).*
6. *Its behaviour is complex and may be unpredictable.*
7. *It has the ability of creativity and innovation, which cannot be found in any other resources.*
8. *It makes decisions in respect of all other resources.”*

Hence it is argued that owing to the unique characteristics, the overwhelming significance of HR exists. HRM is about sound management of HR implying that HRM too is unique. A further description of characteristics possessed by HR is made, it is possible to write that only HR has volition or choice or option. Only human resources in an organization (also called personnel) are able to:

1. Establish goals,
2. Design systems,
3. Make ethical choices,
4. Solve problems,
5. Evaluate success,
6. Revise goals, and
7. Lead others.

All other resources, by contrast, are non-agentic. They must be collected, moved, activated, directed, and combined by human resources. Thus, non-human resources may enable the possibility of performance, but human resources determine whether performance happens or does not happen.

Theoretical Foundation

To ground this proposition in academic theory, four major frameworks are considered. The first is Resource Based View (RBV) which was originally developed by Wernerfelt (1984) and refined by Barney (1991). This theory posits that competitive advantage arises from resources that are Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, and Non-substitutable (VRIN). Human resources, which are nurtured through culture, learning, and leadership, are the most likely to meet all four conditions (Barney, 1991). Machines, equipment, tools, etc can be copied; knowledge, skills, attitudes, decision-making ability, and creativity embedded in employees cannot be copied.

Human Capital Theory is another theory developed by Becker (1964), and it emphasizes that people are not mere labourers but carriers of economic value through their accumulated skills, education, and experience. Unlike fixed assets, human capital can grow with investment and generates compound returns. As per HCT, investments in education, training, and healthcare enhance an individual's productivity and earnings potential. This theory explains how individuals acquire skills and knowledge, and how these investments can lead to increased economic growth and development. HCT fundamentally reshaped how economists and policymakers understand the value and role of individuals within the economy.

Third theory used here is Systems Theory (ST). Wright and Snell (1991) state that ST has a discussion of three things, i.e., inputs, process, and output. It views organizations as open systems that rely on both internal coordination and external adaptation for their survival and effectiveness. ST emphasizes the dynamic interaction between input, process, and output, with the crucial point being that processing and adaptation are functions carried out by human resources. Personnel, not machines or structures, interpret, act upon, and respond to changing circumstances. Effective human resource functions help align all subsystems (e.g.,

departments, teams, individuals) toward common objectives, thereby sustaining organizational health, innovation, and resilience. This underscores the strategic significance of human resources over tangible or passive assets (Chaudhry, Khan, & Hassan, 2015). Human resources serve as integrators, ensuring that systems function coherently. The application of ST in the HRM field was demonstrated in a Sri Lankan study by Iddagoda and Opatha (2020), in which high-performance practices, religiosity, personal character, leadership, and work-life balance were conceptualized as inputs; employee engagement as the process; and employee job performance as the output. This model supports the idea that meaningful human inputs lead to active human processes, which in turn generate valuable human outputs. ST strongly supports the proposition that people are the most vital organizational resource. Unlike machines or financial capital, people are “living systems”. They energize, operate, innovate, adapt, and improve the organization. They scan the environmental influences, create meaning, adjust behaviour, and constantly reconfigure internal processes to respond to environmental changes. This aligns closely with ST’s core emphasis on interrelationships, feedback loops, and adaptive capacity.

Agency Theory (AT) is the fourth theory applied here to create the theoretical foundation. This theory was originally developed by Stephen Ross and Barry Mitnick, independently and roughly concurrently in about 1973 (Mitnick, 2007). AT conceptualizes the relationship between two key actors in an organization: principals (e.g., owners or shareholders) and agents (e.g., managers or employees), recognizing that agents act on behalf of principals. A fundamental premise of the theory is the separation of ownership and control. That is, while principals set the strategic objectives, it is the agents who are tasked with achieving them and executing strategies and other things to achieve them. However, agents may not always act in the best interests of the principals. Instead, they may pursue their own self-interests, particularly when effective monitoring is lacking or incentives are misaligned. This creates the potential for agency problems, or conflicts of interest between the two parties. It is important to emphasize that agents are not passive functionaries; rather, they make strategic choices under conditions of uncertainty. Therefore, human resource behavior becomes central to organizational direction, performance, and integrity. While principals may define goals, it is only through the purposeful actions of agents through execution, adaptation, and problem-solving that these goals can be realized. Agency Theory thus underscores a vital insight: organizational achievements such as product launches, service delivery, market responsiveness, and strategic change require intentional human action. Resources such as money, machines, methods, materials, or technology may facilitate these outcomes, but they cannot initiate or drive action. Only human agents can.

Together, these theories reinforce the claim: personnel are not merely one input among the many inputs available within an organization. They are the active drivers of all organizational outcomes. These theories affirm that only human resources possess the discretion, initiative, creativity, and innovation to work towards the realization of organizational goals, making things happen. Further the theories indicate that all other resources serve as enablers or tools that by themselves cannot transform organizational goals into reality.

Possibility versus Happening: A Philosophical Distinction

At the heart of this article lies a subtle but powerful idea: the distinction between Possibility and Happening. The core idea rests on a differentiation between possibility and happening. Possibility refers to the potential to act or to achieve. It is enabling conditions. It emerges from the presence of resources. In this sense, the possibility is passive. It signals what can be done, given the right combination of non-human resources which are all types of inputs except human resources. Happening is action-based and result-oriented. It denotes the actual realization, execution, or activation of that potential where actions are taken, and decisions are made. It is the realization of what was possible. Happening requires initiative, will, creativity, and effort, which are indeed qualities found only in human beings. Refer to Exhibit 1 that gives examples of possibility and happening.

Exhibit 1. Examples of Possibility and Happening

Possibility	Happening
Having money makes purchasing possible.	Money does not purchase goods; a human must do it.
Having money makes investing possible.	Money does not invest itself; a human must take the risk.
Having a strategy makes implementation possible.	A strategy does not get implemented itself; personnel must coordinate and execute.
Having data makes informed decisions possible.	Data do not analyze themselves; humans must analyze them and interpret them.
Having information makes decision-making possible.	Information itself cannot make decisions. Decisions are made by a human or a manager.

Philosophical echoes can be drawn to support the proposition which is the foundation for this research article. The distinction between possibility and happening finds resonance in classical philosophy (Reeve, 2000; Unlu, 2021). The idea that only human beings make things happen can be better understood through a famous philosophical concept introduced by the Greek philosopher Aristotle (384–322 BCE). Aristotle distinguished between potentiality (*dynamis*) and actuality (*energeia*). A block of marble has the potential to be a statue, but only a sculptor can actualize it. Similarly, only human action converts the possibility into reality. In organizations, resources such as money, machines, and materials are like the block of marble representing possibility. But they do nothing on their own. Only human beings (managers, non-managers) can turn those resources into results, products, or goals achieved. Without human resources, the potential of resources remains unused. This philosophical insight reinforces the proposition suggesting that it is not just a managerial idea; it is also a deep philosophical truth.

Human Resources as the Catalyst

All non-human resources generally lie idle unless they are activated by human resources. A pile of gold does not generate value until someone invests it. A machine does not work unless someone operates it. Data do not generate knowledge unless someone analyzes, interprets, and applies them. In every instance, it is the human being who serves as the catalyst who initiates movement from inertia to motion. Human resources do not simply 'work' in a mechanical sense. They bring to organizations seven irreplaceable catalytic capacities:

1. Cognition: thinking critically, generating options, evaluating options.
2. Emotion: caring about people, goals, and values.
3. Motivation: acting with purpose, enthusiasm, and perseverance.
4. Judgment: making legal, managerial, ethical and strategic choices.
5. Innovation: creating something new and valuable.
6. Involvement: participating in something until it is done
7. Commitment: remaining loyal to purpose or the organization over time.

Machines, money, and materials cannot replicate these capacities. Even Artificial Intelligence, however advanced, lacks ethical, emotional, and contextual reasoning inherent to human beings. Thus, humans alone activate and make other resources useful, valuable, and productive. Further, in an organization human resources are not just people, they are personnel who possess (ideally should possess) seven types of competencies which include technical competency, human relation competency, conceptual competency, intelligence/mental reasoning competency, personality, personal character, and personal management competencies (such as ethical thinking, positive thinking, continuous learning, balancing work and life, time management, career management, and stress management).

In organizational life, strategy, operations, innovation, and change are essential and they all depend on human effort. Machines and systems may automate processes, but it is the human who designs the system, who interprets results, and who resolves conflict or leads teams. Therefore, it is asserted that human resources are not just another input, but they are the primary cause behind all productive planning and output.

The Dambulla Analogy Revisited

Opatha (2009, p. 17) writes: *"In fact other resources make things possible but only human resources make things happen. Happening is more important than possibility of doing in the context of realisation of the goals of the organisation (see Figure 1-2). For instance, assume that you have sufficient money, a good vehicle, time, and a map to go to Dambulla. Possibility of going to Dambulla occurs owing to other resources. However, until you have a right driver you cannot reach there. Happening of going to Dambulla occurs owing to a right driver. If you drive you are the human resource. Hence it is needless to say that HRM is a very important discipline or subject that focuses on efficient and effective utilisation of human resources."* It is possible to reaffirm this analogy with a deeper interpretation. Refer to Exhibit 2. It unpacks the analogy further.

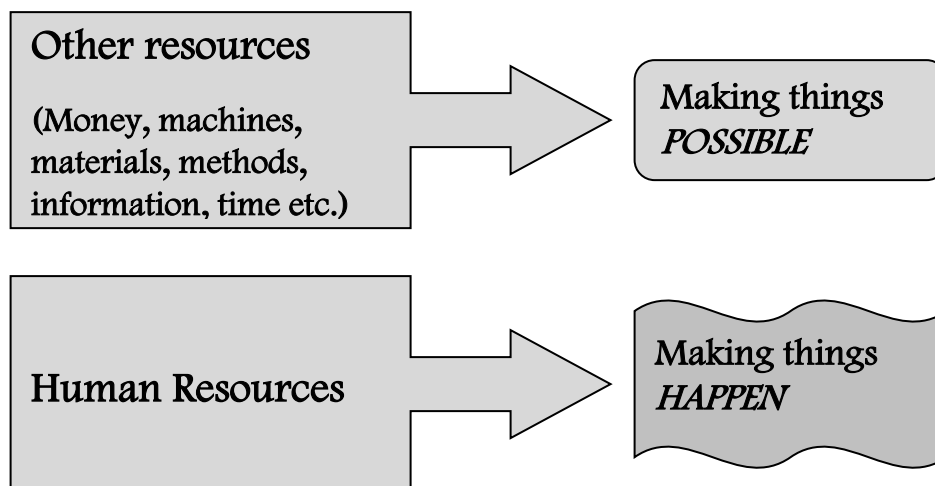
Exhibit 2. Unpacking the Dambulla Analogy

Resource	Symbolic Meaning
Money	Financial capital
Vehicle	Physical infrastructure
Time	Availability of opportunity
Map	Strategic planning and direction
Driver	Human resource

All components are necessary to achieve the goal, i.e., going to Dambulla. Yet, none are sufficient without the driver. It becomes clear that even the best strategy (map) and resources (vehicle, fuel, money) are inert until someone takes the wheel and does driving. The driver may also encounter detours, weather, and roadblocks, and therefore is required to apply judgment and adaptability. These dynamic elements reinforce the need for capable, engaged, and committed human agency, in simple a right driver. The analogy becomes even more profound when a wrong driver is considered. A reckless driver leads to destruction. A sleeping driver results in stagnation. But the right driver reaches the right destination at the right time in the right way. A visionary driver reaches further destinations. HRM, therefore, is not about appointing or assigning any driver, but about cultivating the right driver, through recruitment, selection, training, development, and leadership.

Expanded Visual Model

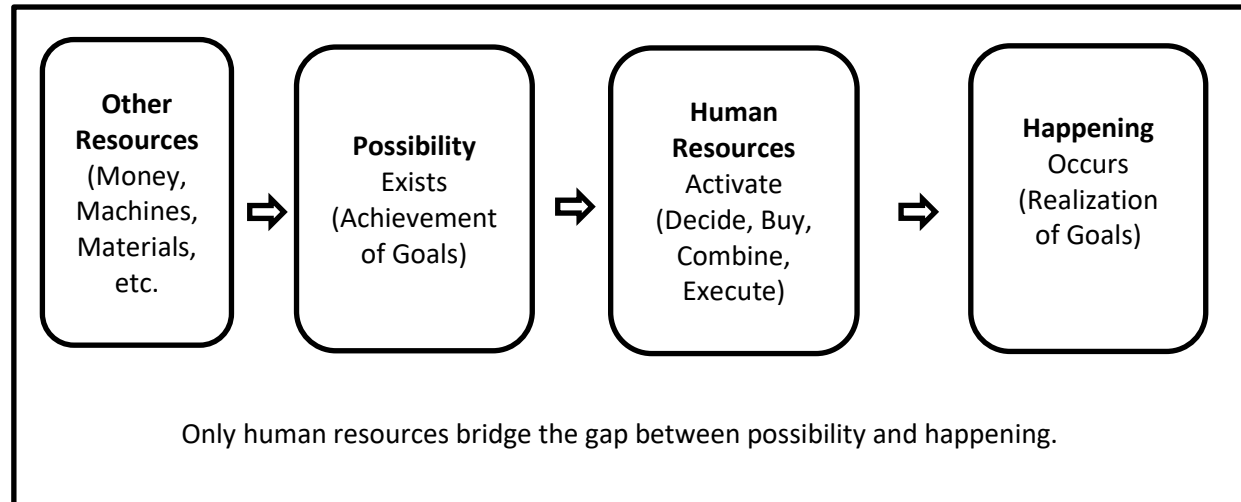
A figure was developed in Opatha (2009, p. 18) for the purpose of presenting visually the proposition, i.e., “Other resources make things possible. Only human resources make things happen.” Refer to Figure 1 for the original figure.

Figure 1. Original Visual Model: Other Resources and Human Resources

Source: Opatha (2009)

An attempt was made to give an updated version of Figure 1-2 in Opatha (2009, p. 18). Refer to Figure 2 for the updated version. It shows visually how personnel work as the activator of realization of goals of an organization.

Figure 2. The Updated Version: Human Resources as the Activator of Goal Realization



Human Resource Management (HRM)

There is a gap between the possibility of achieving organizational goals and the happening or actualization of achieving organizational goals. This gap needs to be filled, and it can be filled only by human resources. Hence, human resources bridge the gap between the possibility of achieving organizational goals and the happening of achieving organizational goals. Thus, human resources can be perceived as the engine of ‘happening’. Personnel in an organization are the actors, the drivers, and the real doers. They transform possibility into happening through decision-making, creativity, innovation, collaboration, and action. They are the engine that drives goal accomplishment. HRM is the system or mechanism that builds, fuels, maintains, and steers that engine. Specifically, HRM enables the engine through a set of integrated activities. It is not the engine itself, but rather the system that ensures the engine is:

- Acquired (job analysis, planning, recruitment, selection),
- Built and developed (induction, training, performance management, development),
- Maintained (employee relations, well-being),
- Kept ethical and efficient (discipline, values, culture),
- Retained and motivated (rewards, career management).

So, HRM enables and strengthens the engine, but does not replace it. Hence, human resources are the engine of ‘happening’, and HRM is the mechanism for managing the engine of ‘happening’.

If human beings are the catalysts, then HRM is the mechanism that procures, prepares, develops, guides, and keeps these catalysts. HRM is not merely an organizational function or a functional field of organizational management, it is a systemic function that permeates all aspects of organizational life, and a systemic functional field that affects and relates to all functional fields of organizational management such as Marketing, Finance, Operation, and others. Its activities include job design, job analysis, human resource planning, recruitment, selection, hiring, induction, performance evaluation, training & development, career management, pay management, incentives management, welfare management, management of employee movements, health and safety management, discipline management, grievance handling, and labour relations. HRM is the efficient and effective utilization of human resources to achieve goals of an organization (Opatha, 2009). Without HRM, there is no organized conversion from possibility to happening.

HRM obtains the right people at the right time in the right way to the right jobs to achieve the right goals, mission, and vision of the organization. As the steward of human capital, HRM activates human potential which is the inherent capacity of personnel to learn, grow, pursue, and reach their full capabilities, both individually and collectively. In the case of right personnel, there is a vast reservoir of abilities and talents waiting to be explored, expressed, and enhanced. This activated human potential drives the unit, department, and the entire organization through human actions. Thus, Human resources bridge the gap between possibility and happening, and HRM is the management of these human resources. HRM ensures the right quality and quantity of human resources. HRM enables human resources to become capable, motivated, engaged, and committed to realizing organizational goals. Therefore, while human resources are the engine of happening, HRM is the strategic mechanism that mobilizes, maintains, and drives that engine toward goal realization.

HRM can be positioned as the discipline that ensures that human resources are recruited suitably, selected accurately, inducted properly, developed meaningfully, motivated sufficiently, retained continuously, and managerially and ethically aligned and performance-driven. Thus, HRM is not an administrative adjunct but the core enabler of organizational actualization. In this way, HRM emerges not as a support function, but as a core discipline essential to strategic execution and organizational vitality.

Concluding Remarks

This theoretical research article presented and analyzed the proposition that: “Other resources make things possible. Only human resources make things happen.” (Opatha, 2009, p.17). The proposition was substantially supported by four general theories, philosophical reasoning and illustrative analogies. The distinction between possibility and happening provides some major implications for HRM. One implication is that the quality of ‘happening’ depends on recruiting and selecting individuals who are capable and have the right attitudes. Guest (1987) emphasizes quality as a goal of HRM in his classic model of HRM. This encompasses concerns such as the quality of staff and the implementation of desirable policies for acquiring, training, and retaining employees with high ability, skill, and adaptability. It also involves ensuring quality performance through setting and maintaining

high standards, as well as managing the organization's public image, particularly in relation to its HR policies (Opatha, 2024, drawing on Guest, 1987). Hence, special due attention must be given to recruitment and selection. Further, to make things happen, personnel who had been selected in the right way for the right jobs must be motivated, engaged, and committed. In this regard, pay, incentives, and welfare management need special attention. Since only human resources make things happen, investment in education, training, and continuous development should be viewed as productive expenditure, not overhead. Another implication is that HRM must be viewed not as a support or administrative function but as the core enabler of organizational goal realization. Strategic importance of HRM as a discipline is emphasized to enable the 'happening'. This is the strategic centrality of HRM. HRM is an integral part of Strategic Management (SM) in line with the classic HRM model called the Matching Model of HRM developed by Devanna, Fombrun, and Tichy (1984). HRM must be integrated with strategic decision-making. Strategy formulation is human-driven, execution of strategy is employee-dependent, and competitive advantage comes from aligning HRM with strategy

This article underscores a fundamental truth: 'happening'—the realization of purposeful action—is more crucial than mere 'possibility' in achieving organizational goals. And only human resources make things happen. All other resources, regardless of their sophistication, depend on human engagement for activation and utilization. In light of this, HRM must be positioned not as merely administrative or operational, but as philosophically and strategically central to organizational success. HRM professionals must be empowered as partners in strategy formulation as well as strategy implementation. It is true that non-human resources alone are insufficient to realize the achievement of organizational goals. It is human insight, initiative, motivation, engagement, commitment, and action that transform possibility into happening, i.e., achievement of the desired goals of an organization. Therefore, HRM is not optional, but it is existential to success and continuity of an organization. That is, the very existence, vitality, and progress of an organization are contingent upon how well it mobilizes and manages its human resources.

The paper paves the way for some future research. This conceptual framework opens multiple directions for academic inquiry. Possible research questions include: (1) How do industries vary in their dependence on human-activated vs. automated performance? (2) What competencies most influence an employee's ability to "make things happen"? (3) How can "happening" be measured as a unique contribution of human capital, beyond productivity? (4) In what ways does HRM orientation differ in high-happening organizations compared to low-happening ones? (5) Can AI and automation ever fully replicate the human catalytic function, or do they primarily increase the efficiency of possibility? Such research can further advance our understanding of human agency as the linchpin of organizational success.

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