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**Putting Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) into Practice: An
Australian case study**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
University of Tasmania
(November, 2011)

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ABSTRACT

Since the publication of the Harvard Strategic Human Resource Management (SHRM) framework in 1984, there has been a significant volume of research on the link between the existence of HRM policies and organisational outcomes. However, there has been little development in terms of theoretical HRM models. There have also been calls for greater research into the mechanisms that link HRM policy and organisational outcomes. In particular, there is literature on the ‘what’ of SHRM but limited coverage of an integrated approach to ‘how’ SHRM can be effectively implemented.

This issue provides the research opportunity for this thesis. The study focuses the Tasmania Fire Service (TFS) and its progress in developing a new HRM policy on managing performance that is centred on workplace feedback. A preliminary framework was developed based on the work of Guest (1987, 1997, 2002) that postulated four tests in a sequential approach to SHRM: linking HRM strategy to firm strategy (vertical fit); consistency across HRM policies (horizontal fit); effective implementation (managerial support) and outcomes (employee response).

The study was conducted as longitudinal embedded single case study with qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews and focus groups gathered. Fifteen focus groups and seven individual interviews were held as part of the mid-trial review and evaluation of the workplace feedback trial. There were also thirteen key informant interviews held with executive managers, line managers and HR specialists over the period of the research.

In order to address the research opportunity, this thesis answers three research questions. The first question was: what are the relevant contextual issues for an organisation to consider in developing a new human resource policy? The answer to this question found a set of external

and internal contextual factors that influenced the TFS's approach in developing and implementing workplace feedback. The study found that the organisation's history, leadership style, and culture influenced the nature and manner of HRM policy development. The importance of maintaining a consistent approach was highlighted.

The second research question was: what are the challenges for the HR function in meeting the four tests drawn from the Guest framework? The answer to this question demonstrated the complexities and competing priorities for a HR function in seeking to achieve vertical and horizontal integration of HRM policies to achieve desired employee behavioural responses. Particular challenges identified included prioritising and sequencing of SHRM activities, obtaining consistency across HRM policies, the HR function maintaining credibility and visibility, and the importance of a consistent and sustained communication strategy.

The third research question was: how can an integrated SHRM process model assist a public sector organisation to design and progress towards implementation of a new HRM policy? The answer to this question indicated that the integrated SHRM process model can provide guidance on factors to be considered in developing a HRM policy in a dynamic environment. The longitudinal feature of the study contributed to the finding that the role of the HR function and its inter-relationships with executives, line managers and employees requires more prominence than SHRM theory has suggested.

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