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Seeing the "Human" Behind Human Resources

A guest article by Garold L. Markle



As an HR generalist in a series of Fortune 500 corporations, I was instructed to treat employees more like “resources” than “humans.” We went to great lengths to focus on “the worker” while avoiding as much as

possible anything personal. What I soon discovered, however, is that when you go to the market looking for employees, people show up.

In addition to explaining otherwise illogical actions, treating people as three dimensional human beings also helps with engagement and retention. The default position for most kind-hearted managers is to treat direct reports like they wanted to be treated when they held a similar post. This strategy may work with many, but seldom with all.

Take the high potential 38-year old engineer who was tactfully avoiding her manager's encouragement to seek promotion. She clearly had the skill set to take on more responsibility and had held her current job long enough to move on. Any longer in her current role and she'd likely be bypassed by less stellar peers. Her boss was pushing her (as he had been pushed himself) to help her achieve her true career potential. Why the illogical failure to launch?

The real reason is that she was trying very hard to have a baby. She was fearful her window was closing and she'd struggled for years with conception. She and her partner were now thinking of adopting. Her assumption was that it would be easier for the organization to allow her to take temporary leave from her current position than from the more elevated post. She hadn't talked with her manager about it because it was literally none of his business, and he never asked. When we introduced a coaching system which requested her to talk about hopes and dreams for the future, however, she quickly volunteered the heartfelt and pragmatic reasoning that explained her heretofore mysterious reluctance to take on more responsibility. She literally cried in relief that she could talk openly with her manager about her most significant life goals. He responded almost immediately with a plan that would successfully accommodate both her personal and the organization's business needs.

I realize that getting to know the whole human worker goes against the grain of what many, like me, are taught in the finest HR schools. We're cautioned to be objective and dispassionate, we're trained to take out "rater bias" and focus on how each individual compares to an ideal norm. However, I don't think that approach works to encourage behavior change, retention, motivation or promotion in the real world and it almost never keeps you safe from a legal perspective.

The quest for objectivity inevitably fails. Ratings and evaluations are, and will always be, inherently subjective despite the requirement by law to avoid both "discriminant intent" as well as "discriminant impact." That means we've got to normalize ratings for race, sex, age, Vietnam Veteran status, religion, medical needs, etc. You couldn't be objective if you wanted to. It's quite literally illegal.

I think the key to minimizing legal exposure has little to do stuffing the files with documentation of norm

violations. The best strategy for legal protection is to curb righteous indignation. The people who sue you are angry. They're hurt, embarrassed and surprised. They don't feel understood, appreciated or acknowledged as a whole human being. Because they hurt, they want you to hurt. And they'll use everything you've put down in writing to extort pain from those who gave pain to them.

Some people may ultimately need to be let go, and they probably won't send you a Christmas card after you walk them out the door. But if you acknowledge their humanity while confronting them about performance gaps, they won't send you a lawsuit, either. You'll understand and optimize more and ruin less.

So, how can you show that you understand your human resources are, first and foremost, human beings?

- **Seek First to Understand:** Stephen Covey's Habit of listening before speaking is key to recognizing the humanity in others. Far too often we find ourselves acting on illogical observable behavior that has much deeper logical roots.
- **Ask 5 Whys:** Ask employees why they are doing things that look counterintuitive. Expect the first answer or two to be superficial. Somewhere between the third and fifth "Why?" will come the breakthrough. Have the Kleenex handy.
- **Adopt an Attitude of Abundance:** Understand that you only rent talented workers. You don't own them. They will come and go over time. Do your best to keep them tied to you for as long as the situation supports a mutual win. When things change, make transitions easy and natural.
- **Systemized Scalability:** Create a culture where understanding individuals is the norm, not the exception. Utilize a system like Catalytic Coaching that institutionalizes listening and the forging of deep connections in a way that can be routinized and monitored throughout your organization.
- **Earn Trust:** You can't mandate that people tell you about their personal lives. They must believe and experience that it's safe to do so. Look for a few brave souls to do it first. After some success stories that they spread, not you, others will open up and self-disclosure will increase over time.

Garold Markle is the author of [Catalytic Coaching: The End of the Performance Review](#) and the training program, [No More Performance Evaluations!](#) He is Sr. Vice President and Partner of [Energage](#), a culture technology company dedicated to making the world a better place to work together. He will be presenting both a general and breakout session during our Spring Conference in Savannah, so be sure to register now!

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