



WORDS ON WISE MANAGEMENT

Is your HR department the police or a partner?

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Close your eyes and picture your current HR staff. Does your HR department function as a strategic partner or as a police force? Do they spend their time addressing people who aren't meeting the dreaded dress code, who can't get along with others, or who are always late? Are they continually pushing to grab the seemingly unattainable "seat at the executive table"?

For years, when HR was known as "Personnel" and even after, the department was mostly concerned with the mechanics of hiring and paying people correctly as well as making sure that all employees were following the organization's rules. It was all about compliance and not deviating from company expectations for staff. HR swooped in when an employee was not wearing proper clothes or when someone wore a T-shirt with inappropriate language on it. HR took care of the situation while the department managers looked on. Why should the manager handle it when all they have to do is call HR?

Even today, HR is often called on to help settle employee relations difficulties. If Sally and John can't get along in the workplace, managers throw up their hands and call in HR or Employee Relations to handle it. The same goes for handling other employee issues, such as tardiness. The view from many in other departments is to call HR (the "hammer") to have a serious conversation with the problem employee and provide another chance to bring him or her in line with corporate policy.

Bringing value

Is this the value that you see HR bringing to the organization? Wouldn't it be better if HR was steadily moving from an enforcement role to that of a strategic partner? For many HR professionals, acting as the rule-enforcer or police is comfortable—it's what they know and where they feel at home. It's also what many organizations have grown to expect from them.

Changing HR's perception in the workplace can be great, but it can also be scary to both HR staff and the rest of the enterprise. This reminds me of a

great title of a book I saw at the airport recently called "Change is Great . . . You Go First."

Here is how change can happen:

Empower your managers. In HR professionals' comfort zone of being the police, they have disempowered the managers in the organization. As a strategic partner, HR should be a "guide from the side" to the managers, who should be the ones to handle most employment situations with their subordinates.

Insist your HR staff understand the business. Although they may be HR professionals, it's hard to obtain "trusted adviser" status from a department of people who only seem to know "HR things" and not how the business runs and what is needed to be successful. It's great that HR is keeping the organization compliant in many ways, but for HR to be a strategic partner, the entire staff must know and understand the business in which they operate.

Socialize your HR department's innovative practices and ideas. HR *can* be innovative. When the HR department comes up with a new and better way to do things, make sure that they are socializing and spreading the word about it to influencers in the business. Those influencers can help HR move the needle from being seen as traditionalists to innovative strategic partners who are always looking to help the employees and the business grow.

Learning curve

Now, when you think about your HR department staff, can you see them transitioning into strategic partner status? If so, encourage them. They will be learning new things as they grow into the strategic partner role, but it will be so worth it to all parties in the end if they can make the move from police to partner!



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