

Keeping the Human in Human Resources

Joanne L. Smikle

We're driven almost mad by the increasing pressures that dictate a near chaotic pace. If we are not very careful, very purposeful and very directed, we get swept, pulled and carried every which way the wind blows. And, in all of that unplanned, often uncoordinated, movement we lose sight of our primary objective---human service.

By its very nature, human resources, from compensation and benefits to training to organizational development to succession planning, is ultimately about people. Our focus gets obscured because of all the competing demands that occupy any given day. This article provides three practical interventions for refocusing on the people that should be dictating our priorities.

Assessment

People first. It sounds pretty simple, even trite. Somehow it gets lost in the shuffle when, in fact, it should be the guiding light for every human resource professional. Actually putting people first requires concerted effort. The process begins with a thorough assessment. Start by querying your customers. Are your products, processes, systems and services meeting their needs? What else would they like from you? Turn your evaluation inward and ask the same of your team. How does the department measure up in their eyes? Where do they see deficiencies and shortcomings?



This assessment requires real bravery. We often get lulled into a false sense of security, thinking all is well, when in fact mediocrity abounds. Gathering this data may be an eye-opener. Case in point, Denise, the HR Director of a multi-site healthcare organization, determined that they needed customer service training for all employees. She decided that the training would revolve around the organization's principles of service to the poor and underserved. Denise and her trainers identified seven core competencies that the training would address. They developed the training modules and sent them out for comments. Expecting only minor suggestions for tweaking, they were shocked when they got volumes of feedback indicating that their modules were missing the mark. The modules, as they had initially formulated them, addressed everything except the comments that had come back on the patient satisfaction surveys, the observations of managers and the perceptions of the medical staff.

When we operate in a vacuum, either by accident or design, it is almost impossible

to meet customer needs. Denise, the HR director cited above, was a very hard working, committed manager. She completed all of her reports on time. She did endless spreadsheets justifying this, that and the other. Denise diligently oversaw her staff's activities. The problem Denise faced, like many others in her position, was that she somehow lost touch with the human element. She invested countless hours on the technical, albeit required, components of her position. She unwittingly conducted an assessment of her intended training and was flabbergasted to learn that the product did not meet customer needs. Think about the products that you've worked to develop only to see them met with yawns, snores, snickers and other forms of derision. Perhaps an assessment, before the fact, would have been beneficial.

Strategic Intent

Next step in refocusing on the people who should be driving the process is Strategic Intent. Your human resources department's work should, of course, revolve around and support the larger organizational strategy---that is the heart of alignment. However, there is still a duty to have strategic intent on the micro level. That means that the entire department will share the same focus on service and support. Staff, regardless of the position or level, will view their work from the customer's perspective. It also means

that the measures and markers of success for your staff will be unambiguous and clearly linked to the human element.

Achieving strategic intent is easier said than done. It requires a delicate balancing act between individual and team contributions. Both need to be focused on the same target, which is often a moving target. This intent is what guides resource allocations and staffing decisions. It is the element that guides leadership decisions, both in the human resource realm and in the larger organization. In the words of Gary Hamel and C.K. Prahalad, "...strategic intent envisions a desired leadership position and establishes the criterion the organization will use to chart its progress..."

Different from strategic planning, intent focuses on meaningful targets and allows flexibility in hitting them. When we operate out of our intent, versus our plan, what we recognize is that our customer's needs are never static, so our dialogue with them must be never-ending. When we function like Denise, the beleaguered HR Director, our isolation from customers impedes our ability to build strategic intent in the department and the organization.

As much as strategic intent may sound like yet another consultant's buzz word, it is not. It can become a tangible leadership strategy that will enable you to revitalize the work of your entire department. Here are a few techniques for creating strategic intent in the human resources function:

- **Gather and incorporate intelligence from the business units to develop clarity about their issues**
- **Design clear, flexible processes synchronized with customer issues**
- **Develop a customer focus in every position and function**
- **Establish clear milestones and performance management mechanisms**
- **Build on-going dialogue within the department and with the business units**

- **Engage all staff in the development of the requisite skills and competencies**

Compassion

Assessment and building strategic intent are both seemingly cut-and-dried business processes. The third tool for focusing on the human element is of the emotional nature. It is Compassion. Ugh, how I hate to yield to the "touchy-feely"...but, alas, it is a must. All of us in the human service business have to possess an interest in the welfare of the people we serve. It's a requirement for the field. It gets lost when we lose our direction and forget that our targets are not percentages or positions, but the people who comprise both. When we are examining new benefits, it is important that we consider the fact that those benefits are used by real, alive moms, dads and children. When we are analyzing compensation packages we can never afford to forget that the money goes to support couples, families, churches, charities, synagogues and siblings. When we are designing training, we have to do it with an eye to the participant. We are responsible for giving them skills and competencies that extend beyond our work environment to benefit a larger professional community.

Compassion, an abiding, sincere interest in the well-being of our people, extends beyond lip-service. Many a corporation have all of the flowery prose touting their commitment to people, to the environment and the larger world. When employees don't experience that in their daily interactions, they quickly label promoters of the propaganda (that's the HR folks) hypocrites. Little gestures eliminate that label. Learn names. I am appalled at how many people in this business say "I just can't remember names." Try a little harder. People, everyone from the CEO to the janitor, have been given these neat little monikers that identify them. It is a sign of respect to use those monikers.

Create an environment of celebration within your department. Remember the milestones--whether it's a birthday, an anniversary, the receipt of a professional certification or just getting through to Friday.

My very first boss (yes, I used to work in the real world), Les Dwonzyk, had a keen sense of the importance of celebration. The entire department was encouraged to celebrate formally and informally. From happy hours to pot luck brunches to birthday parties, we were in constant celebratory mode. Les' emphasis on the human element made him very approachable, though at first blush, he appeared not to be a 'people person.' Even those among us who would rather be immersed in facts and figures are well-served to put some emphasis on human relations.

Summary

The most important facet of our work is the people we serve. Unlike other departments, we have easily identifiable customers. Building dialogue with them will yield valuable information on their needs. However, our commitment to them goes far beyond dialogue. Human resource leaders are responsible for using Assessments to systematically gather data. This feedback enables us to customize products, services, and systems. Additionally, we are required to run our departments with very clear Strategic Intent. This enables us to use resources wisely and in a manner consistent with the established direction. Finally, Compassion should dictate our approach, because we're serving people.

Joanne L. Smikle provides consulting and training for associations across the country. She moves minds with exciting keynotes, workshops and retreats. Reach her at joanne@smiklespeaks.com or (301) 596-2822.