Turning Policy into Performance

Balancing HR policies and individual needs

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No matter how well intentioned, HR policies which are rigidly enforced can sometimes seem to do more harm than good. At the same time, permitting too much deviation from the norm is equally risky.

The very idea of a "human resources" department is ripe with irony. While the basic notion is sound, (establishing policies and procedures for employees that enable an organization to run smoothly), all too often those very same policies can be complex and confusing.

It's not hard to understand why: organizations are made up of people, every one of whom is unique. Differences in age, gender, background, experience, ethnicity, finances, health, education, family circumstances, as well as personal and professional aspirations, pretty much guarantee that it's impossible to create one set of rules that will make equal sense for everyone all the time.

This is especially true since individual circumstances are likely to change significantly during a person's tenure with the firm. Finding the right balance between standardized HR policies and individual needs gets trickier with scale; larger firms simply need more rules in order to function. That said, no matter how well intentioned, HR policies which are rigidly enforced can sometimes seem to do more harm than good. At the same time, permitting too much deviation from the norm is equally risky.

Management and staff tend to view HR from two different perspectives. Management needs and desires consistency. Setting clear expectations for all staff is a necessary and proper part of running an effective organization (unless you happen to be managing a punk rock band, in which case all bets are off). It's a basic responsibility of management to see that the established policies are adhered to. Staff, on the other hand, will most often view HR policies from a personal, rather than corporate, level ("how does this affect me?").

The art of HR is in crafting an approach that makes sense to both sides. Complicating the issue is the fact that society, the economy, and the design professions are all undergoing profound changes. The advent of social media has altered the way that people interact, how they share information, and what they expect in terms of personal privacy. The highly competitive economy, now increasingly global, has forced firms to become more strategic and efficient if they want to stay relevant. The A/E/C industry is rapidly adapting to new technologies and construction methods that are changing the way that buildings are designed, documented, and delivered. In short, we live in a fully connected, 24/7 world in which people no longer

aspire to spend an entire career at a single firm, where working nationally or internationally in cross-cultural or cross-generational teams is increasingly common, and where all that's needed is a smart phone to do business from any location, day or night.

Whatever their age, skill level, or position in the firm, people want to be valued and respected. They want to be challenged and inspired by the work that they do, and they want to be fairly compensated. They also need to know that the firm will look after their interests — that there's a safety net in case something goes wrong. Despite all these complexities, there are really only two questions really that matter to each and every person on your staff.

They are:

1) Where do I fit in?
2) How can I stand out?

Crafting your HR policies with these questions in mind will help keep things in proper focus. *Here are few tips:*

NAMES MATTER

A person is a person, not a "human resource", so why call it "HR" in the first place? This is really about maximizing your employees' performance and commitment to the firm. It's about attracting, retaining, and developing talent at all levels in the organization. The very term "HR" connotes bureaucracy, so consider alternatives, like "Career Management" or "Talent Development" or simply "Rules of Engagement".

VALUES TRUMP MONEY

The real goal of HR policy is to clearly communicate the firm's values. What does the organization stand for, what keeps it in business, and how are employees expected to contribute to its success? This is far more important than rules about vacations or timesheets. If the firm's values are clear and consistent, then the desired behavior will follow. The details of salary, health insurance, sick time, etc., are important, to be sure, but they are actually not the driving issue. It's the work that matters most.

Make it a two-way street. The common assumption is that HR policy is "inflicted" on the staff and that they have to suffer the consequences.

However, this overlooks a very real opportunity to use the process in reverse — to find out what your people are really thinking and how they want to be treated. For some, flex time may be more important than salary. For others, the opportunity to work on a certain project type or with leading edge technology may be what keeps them at the firm. Health insurance may be important to senior staff but less so for younger members of the firm. With this in mind, consider involving staff when policies is established; you might be surprised by what you learn.

SET STANDARDS, BUT STAY FLEXIBLE

This is especially tricky, since clear and consistently applied rules are extremely important in running an organization. At the same time, people do not want to be treated like cattle. There are times when adjustments need to be made for individual circumstances. It can help to create a menu of benefits from which each individual can choose (up to a certain overall value). That way, some measure of customization can be built into the system. This can actually lower the overall cost of staff benefits, since not everyone needs everything at the same time.

RECOGNIZE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y, and millennials may work side by side, but they think very differently. Each brings unique attitudes and skills, and each has different needs. The job of effective management is to blend them together in the best possible way. Boomers are more likely to be concerned about retirement, whereas the millennials are probably already thinking about their next job. Gen X and Gen Y may be "digital natives" (very comfortable with technology) but they have a lot to learn from the more experienced staff about what actually happens on a construction site. When establishing your office policies, find ways to bring these differences into alignment.

RE-THINK THE PERFORMANCE REVIEW

There are pros and cons to the dreaded annual performance review. It is helpful to give (and get) regular feedback from the staff, but at the same time, people have learned how to game the

system. A good coach understands that the best time to correct errant behavior is when it actually occurs, not once per year, and that praise should be given in public but criticism should be offered in private. The most effective performance reviews require a free and frank exchange of views, and this should apply equally to both staff and management. Learn to listen carefully, and bear in mind that the most important question is what the firm should be doing differently in order to help each employee become more effective.

KEEP IT SIMPLE

Policies should be drafted in clear, simple language that is easy to understand, so avoid the legalese. After all, you want your people to be focused first and foremost on their jobs, not worrying about the arcane details of their healthcare coverage.

In a professional services firm, people are the most important (and the most expensive) asset, by a wide margin. Think about your HR policies as a design problem: What is the best way to attract talent? How can you develop that talent to its fullest potential? What will keep your people interested, engaged, and committed to the firm? A good place to start is by listening. After all, the ultimate goal of HR is to turn policy into performance.

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