



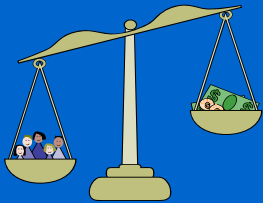
Southern Building Material Association's Human Resources Newsletter

November 2011

"Membership Pays When you Participate."

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5 Reasons You Must Get the Employee's Explanation

It's critical to get the employee's explanation for performance problems and to include it in your documentation, says West, principal at Employment Practices Specialists in Pacifica, California.

Yes, West admits, when you ask for explanations, many times you'll hear some stunning—sort of amusing—responses:

*"I didn't know the policy meant **all** types of alcohol were prohibited at work."*

"I didn't realize I had to get approval for a flexible schedule."

"I didn't know my practicing the Heimlich maneuver on my co-workers could be offensive and unwelcome."

All humor aside, West explains, including the employee's explanation in your documentation is important. It does several things, she says:

- 1. Ties the employee to his or her "story."** From a legal perspective, that's important, West notes. If you don't pin the employee down to a specific explanation, a clever attorney may later come up with another explanation that could be plausible to a jury or government agent.
- 2. Shows two-way communication.** Including the explanation indicates that you want to find out if there's something positive that you can do to improve the situation.
- 3. Demonstrates your fairness.** Remember that juries are often more motivated by their sense of fairness than by the specifics of the law in question.
- 4. May help you correct employee performance.** Again, you are not out to punish or find fault, you want to help the employee improve and be a productive member of the staff.
- 5. May reveal a reasonable explanation.** It's normal to assume that there is no reasonable explanation, but there may be. For example, perhaps materials run out at certain times and that's interfering with production, or perhaps there's a child with a terrible illness, and that's responsible for an employee being 10 minutes late.

Dealing with documentation—a critical task, but certainly not your only challenge. In HR, if it's not one thing, it's another. Like FMLA intermittent leave, overtime hassles, ADA accommodation, and then on top of that whatever the agencies and courts throw in your way.

Quotes of the Month

Henry Ford: On Money

"If money is your hope for independence you will never have it. The only real security that a man will have in this world is a reserve of knowledge, experience, and ability."

"Always bear in mind that your own resolution to success is more important than any other one thing." --Abraham Lincoln

The 9 Essential Skills of Human Resources Management - How Many Do You Have?

by Jay Schleifer

Check your inventory against ours and see!

When interviewing a potential new hire, it's standard procedure for a Human Resources professional to assess the candidate as compared to a list of key skills and personal characteristics needed for the job.

In considering ideas to start our new HR Daily Advisor service, some at BLR thought it might be interesting to turn the tables on the profession, and come up with a list of such attributes for Human Resources professionals themselves.

In no way is this authoritative, but it is the opinion of people, including BLR Founder and Publisher Bob Brady, who've spent decades meeting with HR professionals, supporting their goals and reporting their achievements. You may agree or not with our assessments, but either way, we'd like to hear about it via the "share comments" link on this page.

That said, here goes:

Human Resources Management Key Skill #1: Organization

Human Resources management requires an orderly approach. Organized files, strong time management skills and personal efficiency are key to the Human Resources function. You're dealing with people's lives and careers here, and when a manager requests a personnel file or a compensation recommendation that lines up with both the organization and the industry, it won't do to say, "Hold on. I'll see if I can find it."

Human Resources Management Key Skill #2: Multitasking

On any day, an HR professional will deal with an employee's personal issue one minute, a benefit claim the next and a recruiting strategy for a hard-to-fill job the minute after. Priorities and business needs move fast and change fast, and colleague A who needs something doesn't much care if you're already helping colleague B. You need to be able to handle it all, all at once.

Human Resources Management Key Skill #3: Discretion and Business Ethics

Human Resources professionals are the conscience of the company, as well as the keepers of confidential information. As you serve the needs of top management, you also monitor officers' approaches to employees to ensure proper ethics are observed. You need to be able to push back when they aren't, to keep the firm on the straight and narrow. Not an easy responsibility! Of course, you always handle appropriately, and never divulge to any unauthorized person, confidential information about anyone in the organization.

Human Resources Management Key Skill #4: Dual Focus

HR professionals need to consider the needs of both employees and management. There are times you must make decisions to protect the individual, and other times when you protect the organization, its culture, and values. These decisions may be misunderstood by some, and you may catch flak because of it, but you know that explaining your choices might compromise confidential information. That's something you would never do.

Human Resources Management Key Skill #5: Employee Trust

Employees expect Human Resources professionals to advocate for their concerns, yet you must also enforce top management's policies. The HR professional who can pull off this delicate balancing act wins trust from all concerned.



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Human Resources Management Key Skill #6: Fairness

Successful HR professionals demonstrate fairness. This means that communication is clear, that peoples' voices are heard, that laws and policies are followed, and that privacy and respect is maintained.

Human Resources Management Key Skill #7: Dedication to Continuous Improvement

HR professionals need to help managers coach and develop their employees. The goal is continued improvement and innovation as well as remediation. And looking to their own houses, the HR professional also uses technology and other means to continuously improve the HR function itself.

Human Resources Management Key Skill #8: Strategic Orientation

Forward-thinking HR professionals take a leadership role and influence management's strategic path. In gauging and filling the labor needs of the company, devising compensation schemes, and bringing on board new skill sets leading to business growth, they provide the proof for the often-heard management comment, "People are our most important asset."

Human Resources Management Key Skill #9: Team Orientation

Once, companies were organized into hierarchies of workers headed by supervisors. Today, the team is king. HR managers must consequently understand team dynamics and find ways to bring disparate personalities together and make the team work.

Nine Skills, But Also One Caveat

As we listed these skills, one thing we didn't do was try to prioritize them. Because no general list of skills can take into account the business strategy at your particular organization.

Which leads to the caveat we mentioned, as expressed by Bob Brady.

"HR is a creature of, and serves the business strategy," Brady says. "It's important for HR people to know what that strategy is and what makes the business tick so the approach to HR can be tailored accordingly.

"Never think of HR in isolation," he advises. "Because if Human Resources professionals think of themselves as 'just HR,' that's what the rest of the organization will think too."

The 4 Most Serious Sins of Documentation

by Steve Bruce

Rule number one in documentation, says attorney Allison West, is to include all the details, but you have to ignore that rule because of rule number two—be concise.

When doing your documentation, it's important to offer up all the facts, says West. Paper is cheap, she adds. However, at the same time, don't be so wordy that you ignore rule number two, which requires documentation to be concise.

West, principal at Employment Practices Specialists in Pacifica, California, offered her suggestions at SHRM's annual conference and exhibition, held recently in Las Vegas. Here are her tips on bulletproof documentation:

Avoid 'As you know' Memos

When you write "As you know," you're skimping on the details because you have previously discussed issues. That's dangerous, says West. "As you know" memos are typically vague and ambiguous, and they are open to interpretation. Bulletproofing documentation means including details and important facts each time you write. For example:

"As you know, we have discussed your attendance on numerous occasions. Each time you stated you would try harder."

This is a typical "as you know" memo. It means something to the sender, but not to other



Again, it's better to stick with the facts, says West. For example, say Beth explained she was late, again, because of car problems.



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readers (like juries or federal agents). It needs details, says West.

- What were the problems?
- When were the discussions?
- What expectations were discussed?
- What follow-up was planned?

Avoid sarcasm

Sarcasm is never going to look good to later reviewers of your documents. For example:

- You might actually be the only person in the history of our company to never get a performance bonus.
- Clearly you don't care.
- Do you really want to work here?
- I am not surprised by the poor quality of your work product.

Out of context, these comments just look mean. It's always better to write a straightforward presentation of the facts of the situation.

Avoid Starting Sentences with 'You'

When you start sentences with "you," it's probably not going to be a straightforward presentation. For example:

- You don't carry your load.
- You are not committed to your job.

A better approach from West: "I noticed on three occasions your team members asked you to assist them with updating the newsletter mailing list. Each time you refused. You may not realize that each time you say "no" without any explanation or fail to carry an even workload, the team members get frustrated and are forced to take on extra work. How would you feel in their shoes?"

Avoid Editorializing

Again, it's better to stick with the facts, says West. For example, say Beth explained she was late, again, because of car problems. You write:

- Beth is late again. More lame excuses.

Or say that Jorge is struggling to understand the new accounts payable software. You write.

- Jorge is unwilling to put in the time to master the software.

Editorializing hurts the writer's credibility, shows bias, and indicates that the writer is uncaring about the employee's issues or success. "The jury will snarl at you," West says.

Instead, says West:

- Stick with the facts
- Neutralize your tone
- Keep emotion out!