

CHANGE



AGENTS

HUMAN RESOURCES PROFESSIONALS PLAY MAJOR ROLES IN DRIVING CHANGE IN LAW FIRMS AND MAKING THOSE ORGANIZATIONS EXTRAORDINARY PLACES TO WORK.

In April, disaster struck the law firm of Sommer Barnard.

A fierce storm was howling through Indianapolis, Indiana, when a wind tunnel suddenly hit the corner of the firm's building.

"Two partners had their offices so severely damaged it looked as if a bomb had gone off," said Becky Peterson, the firm's Human Resources (HR) Director. "The damage to the building was so serious that it was closed down, and our entire office of some 150 people had to relocate."

An event like that could deal a crippling blow to any organization. Sommer Barnard, though, was able to survive and thrive. Thanks to a high-gear recovery effort, the firm got its employees out of temporary space and into their offices within two months.

"When you have to respond to a disaster, your law firm's true colors come out," Peterson said.

How did Sommer Barnard manage to rebound so fast? Peterson gives a lot of credit to a cooperative culture that she and other senior staff people have taken pains to cultivate over the years. Open communication has led to a mutual understanding of one another's jobs – a level of knowledge requisite to an efficient recovery effort.

SHORTCUT

Many people work together to make law firms great places to work. One person with perhaps the most critical role, however, is the Human Resources Director, whose work has a major impact on everyone in the workplace and can unify employees' efforts toward common goals.

In tune with this positive work environment the firm fosters a family-friendly attitude that encourages work-life balance. It all came together earlier this year when Sommer Barnard was voted one of Indiana's best places to work in a poll conducted by the state's chamber of commerce.

"The award tells me that we are doing something right, that this firm is a sought-after place to work," Peterson said. "The reason is that the firm makes people feel valued professionally and personally."

Many people work together to make law firms like Sommer Barnard great places to work. One person with a critical role, though, is the HR Director, who can do many things to institute policy and procedural changes in response to feedback from every workplace participant, from the new secretary to the veteran senior partner. The result can be a law firm operating as a well-oiled machine where enthusiastic employees create value in a cooperative effort.

"A human resources leader has a great opportunity to make a difference in the overall law firm environment," said Debra Besch, Senior Communications Consultant at Philadelphia, Pennsylvania-based Mercer Human Resource Consulting. "I have seen examples in many different areas, especially in the development of open and transparent communications and the improvement of compensation and performance management."

OUT FROM BEHIND THE DESK

Being a champion of productive two-way communications seems like a laudable goal. But how can an HR leader build an atmosphere of trust where people speak their minds and do not feel threatened? One way is to leave the office and walk around.

"We HR people spend a lot of time sitting in our offices, but if we really want to be the pulse of the firm, we need to get out in the hallways and listen to people," said Ann Flanagan, Director of Human Resources at Chicago, Illinois-based Sachnoff & Weaver Ltd. The four members of the firm's HR department make a point of trying to touch base with as many individuals as possible. Good communication

means remembering not just names, adds Flanagan, but something about each personal life that can establish a bond.

It was just this kind of active communication that alerted Flanagan to the number of employees who had recently lost spouses or parents. The firm reacted by asking the Employee Assistance Program to lead a discussion on understanding and coping with loss. This was part of a series of "Employee Wellness Workshops" on matters of special concern to employees. Other recent topics included stress management, elder care, long-term care and financial planning.

"At every workshop, we ask for feedback from attendees," Flanagan said. "We want to make sure that we are selecting topics that are useful." The firm also presents additional seminars throughout the year on topics such as the firm's retirement and medical plans.

MORE FORMAL DISCUSSIONS

Of the more structured ways of soliciting quality feedback, one of the most productive is the annual performance review. The challenge here is to encourage people to open up.

"We all know that performance evaluations are only as good as the mind-sets of the people responding to them," Peterson said. "If people are open to telling you how they feel, then we can do something in terms of employee development. Otherwise, the evaluation is just an exercise."

Some things work; some don't, adds Peterson. "In the seven years I have been here, I have tried a lot of different things, and a lot of them did not get the results I wanted," she said. The firm's performance evaluation now eschews traditional "1 to 5" ratings, which Peterson finds hard to interpret because "one person's 5 is the same as another's 3.5."

Instead, Peterson's system presents raters with open-ended questions that encourage revealing comments about the person being evaluated. For various categories of performance, the rater must check a box labeled, "Is this person meeting expectations or not?" Usually not content with such a generic statement, the rater tends to write a fuller explanation in the

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accompanying comment box labeled, “Why does this person either meet or not meet expectations?”

“The rater is forced to say something either way, and those comments are exactly what we want to know,” Peterson said. “I also include an area for general comments at the end of the evaluation where the raters can verbalize what they think of this person and why. That very often provides the most valuable information.”

A paper document can be an uninviting communication vehicle for more subtle issues that impact performance. Examples include training needs, employee workload and hours, and whether there is sufficient backup if the employee is absent.

“We have an annual sit-down review in which we discuss issues such as these,” Peterson said. “Even if all of the basics in the paper evaluation are covered, we keep asking how we can do things better.”

As performance reviews are always important, Peterson stresses the special value of the initial meeting that occurs after the new employee has been with the firm between three and six months. “This is probably the most important one we ever do,” she said, citing its potential in helping to resolve issues before they grow too large.

Peterson stresses the importance of including the employee’s time-keeper – the supervising attorney or paralegal – in the initial meeting. While they are invited to later evaluations as well, they often decline to participate.

“Probably one of the most difficult things I do is convincing attorneys to set apart the time to attend the performance review,” Peterson said. “I have to do a lot of nagging. But I think it’s important enough for the law firm. We want to obtain sufficient feedback on every staff person so that we can provide the law firm with a staff that supports them with excellence in every regard.”

BRAINSTORMING RESULTS

If intimate conversations can uncover personal issues for resolution, gatherings of groups of employees can

offer the kind of brainstorming that brings about significant firm-wide change. At Atlanta, Georgia-based Alston & Bird, “town hall meetings” run by the HR department were the springboards for a pro bono program and a near-site child-care center – two programs that reduce stress and contribute to the firm’s culture of healthy work-life balance.

“Our response to the employees shows the workforce that we are engaged with hearing their needs,” said Linda Newman, the firm’s Director of Employee Development.

The pro bono program goes beyond the usual provisions of complimentary legal service: Everyone in the workforce gets an annual allotment of 15 hours of paid time to give something back to the community.

“We try to be liberal in terms of what is considered community service,” Newman said. “For example, recently a working mother went on a field trip with her child’s third-grade class.”

Newman says the child-care center is a huge contributor to working parents’ peace of mind. Coming to work early and staying late is a lot easier when individuals can visit their children at the facility which is only two blocks away.

Such efforts inspire the entire staff to work more enthusiastically. Indeed, Alston & Bird has been recognized as one of the “100 Best Places to Work” by *Fortune* magazine for seven consecutive years.

“An engaged employee benefits the law firm,” Newman said. “Because they are happy to be here, they tend to go above and beyond what is expected in their positions.”

Group discussions also pay off at Sommer Barnard’s monthly staff breakfasts, during which people are encouraged to speak up about issues bothering them. The resulting brainstorming session is a much more creative way of resolving issues than letting everything fall onto the HR staff.

“These monthly meetings are one way we get input from our staff people as we develop policies,” Peterson said. “Feedback is especially important when we develop policies surrounding volatile issues such as

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paid time off. By involving people in the process, we are asking them, ‘How can we have a policy that serves your personal family needs and still meets the needs of the law firm?’”

Involving people in decision-making forces people to look at their situations and keeps them from thinking of themselves as unempowered targets of opportunity for policies handed down from above. For example, feedback from such meetings reinforced Peterson’s feeling that “people want and need flexibility in their work schedules and every part of their lives, so we have tried to do a very good job of accommodating people in that area.”

These meetings are also friendly and informal in nature, with introductions of new staff and inquiries

about whether anyone has something to celebrate. For each attendee who responds, the group applauds with party clappers.

“The bigger we get, the more important this is,” Peterson said. “People want to get to know each other, but it is difficult as we grow larger, and people are working on different floors.”

The senior staff members also hold regular meetings. Several years ago, Peterson initiated weekly discussions for the chief operating officer, controller, directors of marketing and technology, and herself. Over time, each of the participants has gained a deep understanding of the others’ roles.

“These staff meetings have given me a picture of how the firm operates that goes beyond my HR niche,” Peterson said, adding that she attributes the shared knowledge among the senior staff as a major contributor to the firm’s swift and coordinated response to the recent wind storm disaster.

MORE INFORMATION CHANNELS

An alert HR leader will find useful information in a variety of other places. Formal surveys, for example, can add structure to communications efforts and ensure that the law firm covers all of its bases.

“We survey the entire firm before we make a change in benefits, for example,” Flanagan said. “I certainly don’t want to implement something that will not be perceived as a benefit, or something that people do not want.”

Exit interviews can also offer insights into the need for change.

“I find that people who are leaving will provide honest and useful feedback about how we can improve the firm,” Flanagan said. “Since they do not have a fear of losing their jobs, they very often will open up and say something they may have left unexpressed.” It was just such a discussion, she adds, that led the firm to add an Employee Assistance Program.



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Sometimes information about a blaring need arrives on its own feet. In Peterson’s early days at Sommer Barnard, it became apparent there was a problem with insufficient backup staffing. “Attorneys used to come to my office and say ‘my secretary is not here – what am I going to do?’” recalled Peterson, who responded by establishing a “coverage coordinator,” a legal secretary who makes sure that chairs don’t go empty and who broadcasts an e-mail each morning detailing who is absent and who will be covering.

HR DRIVES CHANGE

As the experiences of these law firms attest, feedback from the staff can be essential clues to underlying

issues that need resolution. Moreover, the HR director is in a favorable position to respond to these sources of information in creative ways that bring about significant change.

“Our employment practices are nurtured by the HR department and are aligned with the firm’s core values,” said Newman of the HR leader’s role. “We have a great deal of opportunity to influence the workforce.” ✱

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