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Making Peace with the Rules A Guide to Getting Along with Human Resources

Adapted with permission of author, Carole H. Daily

If you think that getting along with your Human Resources (HR) group at work is difficult, try living with one full-time! My husband informs me all the time how an HR wife is no picnic. HR is all about paperwork, consistency, rules, and policies. Many managers are not big fans of HR as they feel it can be interfering, intrusive, and a “kill joy” when trying to manage their department the way they want. However, HR can be your best friend when you are faced with needing help in resolving a “sticky” employment dilemma.

Think of this scenario: You are a turf manager whose job success is based on having safe, multi-functional, aesthetically-pleasing playing fields. And while you have all the experience, knowledge, and training in this area, you are forced to rely on employees who have probably never received training in turf management, probably have little interest in turf management, and their primary focus for success in their job is something completely different than managing turf. You could write up strict instructions on how to carefully maintain the turf, but the reality is most of these same employees will not read your instructions or instead feel like they have a better way to maintain your turf than you. How successful do you predict you would be with this workforce? How nervous would you be about the success of your field? Welcome to the world of Human Resources!

Human Resources is charged with “limiting liabilities” in the workplace, from safety concerns, to legal personnel issues, to compliance with government standards. HR people are usually trained/certified in legal personnel issues, but often are not the ones directly supervising the majority of company employees. That responsibility falls upon managers who are trained in completely different areas, have a multitude of other activities besides personnel

management, and whose job performance is primarily based on productivity (ie. producing top notch athletic surfaces) - *not* adhering to personnel policies. To assist in limiting the liabilities of potential personnel lawsuits and pitfalls, HR establishes rules and writes policies/handbooks to help managers avoid legal trouble. But rules and policies are only as good as the managers who a) *know the rules/policies*; e.g. actually reads the handbook; and b) is willing to carry rules and policies out as written and established.

Let’s take a look at a common “pitfall” area: lunch breaks. There are very specific federal laws, and sometimes even more stringent state-specific Wage and Hour standards that must be complied with. Usually it consists of a 30-minute, unpaid rest break that must occur somewhere within a shift of five or more hours worked (make sure to check on what applies to your area) for all hourly non-exempt employees. Your handbook almost certainly has provisions to comply with work time breaks. Here’s where this policy is sometimes “fudged” by managers/supervisors: hourly employees wanting to “work-through” lunch so they can go home early; game day events/schedules where it’s hard for you or anyone else to take a scheduled break; employees who grab a quick bite and head back out to work early. Each of these is an area for a possible Wage and Hour violation. Wage and Hour does not care whether or not an employee was “willing” or “wanting” to shorten/not take their break. It is a violation all the same. When Wage and Hour investigates this type of scenario, they don’t stop with one employee or for a one-week time period. They will pull records (usually time sheets/electronic payroll data) and will assign fines for *every* occurrence for *every* employee (additional fines will be levied if it is perceived that a company/management willingly participated in the neglect of Wage and Hour laws). HR probably has established a

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policy to *limit this liability* but again, the policy only works if it is enforced by managers/supervisors properly.

But how do you *change things up* with your department employees when you've always had an understanding that you could "get around" a specific rule/policy? Whenever in doubt- BLAME HR. HR is a great scapegoat for any rule or policy because they would rather be labeled the "bad guy" and limit potential liabilities than have lawsuits on their hands. Statements like, "HR/management is really cracking down on lunch breaks, accurate time sheets, (insert your favorite scenario here). From now on, we've got to do this by the book." Provide copies of the policy from the employee handbook for backup. Yes, your employees were given a copy of their handbook and have access on-line, but the chances that they've read it or even know where it's located are slim at best.

The secret to getting along with HR? Follow the rules that have been set. Easier said than done, and irritating no doubt when trying to manage your department the way you want. But rules and policies are not established to give HR something to do (although I'm sure many of you suspect this to be true). They are established because somewhere, at sometime, there has been a problem with employees in a situation (clocking someone else out, falsifying time records, etc) or because there is a state or federal law that will cause big problems for the company if they are not followed correctly. Think of the *multitude* of laws/policies established for our society on paying/filing taxes, traffic/driving, and "playing nicely with others." Laws weren't established just to give lawmakers something to do (although again - it's easy to sometimes think so), they were established because someone *didn't* pay their taxes; *didn't* stop for a red light, or *didn't* respect someone's boundaries when they punched them in the nose. HR policies and societal laws are established because at sometime, somewhere, someone "wasn't playing nicely in the sandbox."

Get familiar with your company policies/handbook. If you've already read it, read it again. If you don't understand a specific policy, get with HR or management for clarification on why this policy exists and how it applies to your situation. HR is always more willing and appreciative to work with a manager/supervisor *before* a problem exists than after a violation/lawsuit has occurred. Get your HR

representative to explain some specific policies to your employees on an as needed basis. This ensures that most of your employees will be on the same page in understanding company policies. The truth is, managers and supervisors are always held to a different standard than employees. A manager violating a company policy is always more visible simply because employees are watching his or her every move. And while an employee may be all in favor of one rule bent on their behalf, don't ever underestimate how quickly they'll turn if they feel they have been "jilted" on another rule not strictly followed. Treating employees consistently by company rules and policies not only allows you to stay at peace with HR, but limit liabilities for you and your organization in the future.