

Where Should You Put Your Energy When You're an HR Dept. of One?

At a recent Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conference, California consultant Mike Deblieux gave a talk called "HR for New and Solo Practitioners." Suggesting that the individual is probably charged with HR responsibilities for a firm with between 50 and 150 employees, he listed the top 10 areas of focus he recommends, which we'll summarize here. We also spoke with Connecticut HR consultant Debra Salvas, principal of HR Partner, about the role she frequently plays for companies that have no HR department at all. Salvas is quick to point out that being new at the job and doing it alone are two different propositions, which can demand different approaches.

Deblieux's top 10

(1) Learn the organization you're in, from bottom to top and edge to edge—even though you may have lots of fires to put out. Deblieux knows someone who took this approach to the extreme: She refused to begin her job as HR manager until she had spent a month performing a range of other jobs done in the company—had "walked in the shoes," in other words, of salespeople, production line employees, and those in the warehouse. Another useful technique, though, is HRBWA, or human resources by walking around—meeting employees and asking questions as you go.

(2) Avoid blaming everything on the law(s). Compliance, Deblieux says, used to be the number-one task for HR, but it's dropped to at least the middle of the list. The better approach is to align recommended practices, such as affirmative action, harassment prevention, and high ethical standards, with business objectives. That is, instead of saying, "We have to do this or we'll get into legal trouble," offer strategic reasons that help the firm achieve its business objectives. Part of doing so, he suggests, is learning what language your boss speaks and communicating in the same style. Talk detail to a detail person, cost-efficiency to a number cruncher, and so on.

(3) Know your customers, who are the managers and employees of your company, and meet their needs. For example, managers want timely access to accurate personnel files, they need advice on compensation and

workplace features such as flextime, and they demand that the HR pro be practical. Employees need to trust HR, looking especially for confidentiality and occasional advocacy of their concerns. (Here, Deblieux stresses the balancing act: HR must usually advocate top management's issues but should side with employees when the concern is crucial to their well-being or productivity.) Both managers and employees need HR to be fair rather than to treat everyone equally.

(4) Understand what constitutes discrimination and harassment under federal civil rights laws, and, in addition, the protected classes singled out for protection under the laws of states where your company operates.

(5) Understand the difference between exempt and nonexempt employees under the federal Fair Labor Standards Act.

(6) Understand an employer's rights and obligations under the doctrine of at-will employment (again, relying on your national and state binders for information you need). Deblieux stresses that even in the absence of any kind of employment contract, employees need several things from their managers—sufficient training and resources to do their jobs; timely information about performance problems, how to fix them, and the consequences of failure to improve; help and coaching; and the opportunity to succeed.

(7) HR must hire solely on job-related criteria. As a consultant, Deblieux emphasizes that it's HR's function to train managers, if they need it, to avoid subjective decisions and connect all their activities regarding employees to their job functions and how they're performing those functions.

(8) Help managers coach their employees for development and a focus on the future—for continued improvement and innovation as well as correcting past mistakes.

(9) Think of personnel files as relationship files. This serves as a guide to excluding material that doesn't belong in them, such as health information, proof of eligibility to work in the United States, or a photo of the employee.

(10) Finally, know that HR requires an organized and orderly approach, because managers and employees sometimes need information immediately if not sooner. Neat files, good time management, and personal efficiency are key to the function. (For more insights from Deblieux, see his website, <http://www.deblieux.com>.)

Would these be your top 10?

How well your own list would match Deblieux's will depend a lot on who you are and where you came from. As Debra Salvas points out, solo practitioner and new to HR aren't the same thing. For example, an HR department of one may be a person with the HR education and experience that shaped Salvas's thinking. This would be someone thoroughly familiar with the compliance issues on Deblieux's list but not with the company at which he or she has just arrived. Given her background, Salvas remembers visiting a manufacturing company for the first time and immediately noting that management had neglected to post the notices required by the federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration. (In that situation, she cut straight to the compliance issue—the potential for fines, shortcutting trying to relate the posters to the firm's business objectives—maintaining a safe workplace.) On the other hand, if you have just been promoted from office manager or purchasing agent to be the company's first-ever HR manager, your list wouldn't begin with getting to know your firm.

Wherever a practitioner starts, Salvas advocates a somewhat broader view of HR than Deblieux's strikes her as being. An excellent first step, she advises, would be to conduct an HR audit of the company, including benefits, communications, compensation, employee handbook, legal compliance, metrics, new-employee orientation, performance management, personnel files, recruitment, retention, safety and health, training, and HR and business strategies (checking to ensure, with that last item, that the two sets of strategies are properly aligned). As she notes, each area of investigation has its own recommended questions and checklists. The next step, naturally, would be to create and implement an action plan addressing any inadequacies or mismatches turned up by the audit.

Basic metrics, for example, should include evaluations of turnover rate, absenteeism rate, cost per hire, cost-efficiency of benefits and training, analysis of exit interviews, and others. Having those measurements is just the first step: They must also be benchmarked against rates for other businesses in the same industry and in the geographic area to ensure that your compensation rates and other metrics are competitive, and they need to be assessed for whether they appropriately support the company's business objectives.

In auditing performance management, the solo practitioner would want to look at how, and how often, performance evaluations are done (which can be a matter of how well supervisors are trained, Salvas notes); discipline procedures and how well they're followed; what percentage of employees is given measurable objectives for improvement (ideally, she says, it should be all); whether those objectives align with company business strategies; and

what development plans are in place to retain high-potential employees and bring poor performers up to speed.

But suppose you've never done this before

How would you conduct an HR audit if you were new to the profession? Salvas urges inexperienced practitioners to be prompt and aggressive about gaining needed skills and knowledge. Buy books, subscribe to resources (such as HR and safety products from BLR), join trade associations (such as SHRM national and your local chapter), and prepare to obtain HR certification. Use the Internet, call colleagues for advice, visit the libraries of area business schools. And the mandate to be tidy and organized may be Deblieux's way of saying what Salvas describes as the need to "wear many hats." She says, "As a solo professional, you may be handling an employee's personal issue one minute, a benefit claim the next, and a recruiting strategy for a hard-to-fill engineering job the minute after that. Priorities and business needs change fast, and you need to change with them."

There's one more issue that Salvas feels strongly about, and that is HR's role as a conscience of the company. Along with speaking the language and serving the needs of top management, as Deblieux seems to emphasize, she hopes HR will have a seat at the table where policies are made and believes HR must continually monitor officers' approaches to employees and business ethics—and push back whenever it's necessary to keep the whole firm on the straight and narrow. For more of her views, see her website, <http://www.hrpconsulting.com>.

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