

HR-Xchange Summary

January 2010

Topic: Getting the Wrong People Off the Bus – What is HR’s Role?”

Facilitator: Cindy L. Swigert

Cindy Swigert, VP of HR for Wright-PATT Credit Union, kicked off the January HR-Xchange by asking the group to discuss three questions related to getting the wrong people off the bus. Following are the collective responses (with some added comments from Cindy ☺).

1. Who is responsible for getting the wrong people off the bus?

A combination of people are responsible:

This answer was agreed upon by many participants. In other words, it is a coordinated effort to get the wrong people off the bus. That said, where does the buck stop? One could argue that the success of any organization is a combined and coordinated effort – so who should be held accountable? While the tendency is to answer, “We are all accountable,” as HR professionals we all know how difficult it can be to then measure and effect results if there isn’t a specific person to ultimately hold accountable. This led the discussion to . . .

The “Bus Driver” is responsible:

Yes, the CEO, President, Business Owner or Top Dog is the one ultimately responsible for getting the wrong people off the bus. Jim Collins likely agrees with this perspective. If the top leader is responsible for getting the wrong people off the bus, then he or she is going to need some help to identify the wrong people, and then proceed to have practices in place for properly (i.e., legally) moving the wrong people off the bus. This led participants to point out that . . .

HR and the Department Manager are responsible:

It is the manager who needs to set appropriate and consistent job standards, and to put measurements in place to determine where the wrong people are in terms of quality, quantity, knowledge, etc. to do the job. If employees are not meeting the job standards, then the department manager works with HR to insure a fair and consistent process is applied (such as progressive discipline) to move the wrong employees off the bus. However, the wrong people can also be those who can get the job done according to basic standards, but their attitude and work ethic may not be right for the company and may also be distracting other workers. This points to . . .

Peers and Co-Workers are responsible for getting the wrong people off the bus:

In addition to establishing job standards and effective coaching and disciplinary practices, the really big job of the top leader is to establish a culture that expects the wrong people to be moved off the bus, and one that embraces this philosophy – to a person. Identifying people who don’t belong on the bus needs to be a value ingrained at all levels of the organization such that peers and co-workers feel empowered and expected to identify those who do not embody and support the desired cultures and beliefs of the organization. Does everyone understand and buy in to what is expected? Does everyone know what the wrong attitude, behavior and values look like? Does everyone know the cost of having the wrong person on the bus?

2. How does HR hinder the effort to get the wrong people off the bus?

Fear of litigation:

HR is usually expected to protect the organization from unnecessary legal risks involving employment laws and regulations. Therefore, HR can sometimes default to a watchdog mentality; one that is line with conservative legal advice. While the need for documentation and the ability to defend employment decisions are realities, HR needs to learn to mitigate the risk with the overall needs of the business. Having the right people on the bus is fundamental to the company's success. Doing business in America means the business can be sued at any time by any employee. HR's goal should be to take reasonable risks toward getting the wrong people off the bus, and the right people on it.

Fear of judgment regarding recruiting and selection expertise:

Another fear – hmmm . . . is HR operating out of fear first, and problem-solving as an afterthought? This fear is related to the image of HR, and quite possibly to our own insecurities. If we find that someone we (HR) recommended or authorized for hire turns out to be one of the wrong people on the bus, what does that say about our recruiting and selection abilities? Our judgment? Well, here's a news flash – HR people are human! That's right, and therefore we will sometimes make a mistake. But, rather than hiding it, denying it or running from it, shouldn't we stand up to it and be part of the solution? Isn't that the mature and professional thing to do? Besides, whether we help get that person off the bus or not, others will still talk about HR's mistake. Why not own it, fix it and learn from it? We'll be securing our image as caring about the integrity of the culture, and the value of the right people, to the mission and vision of the company.

HR has not set up a process or system, or has not trained managers:

HR owns the process/system for getting the wrong people off the bus. If we don't set that up and train managers on how to use the process as a tool for operational success then we aren't doing all we can do. Sometimes, HR wants to be the needed expert, so instead of training managers the managers need to come to HR to tell the story, get permission, etc. These systems and processes should not be HR's secret domain! That said, we should also set up the process for rewarding the right people on the bus – we need the entire system, not just part of it. Too often, HR is focused on attracting and retaining talent; but there's a third leg to that stool, and it is getting the wrong people off the bus. We need to attract the right talent, divest the company of mismatched or poor talent, and retain the right talent; our systems and processes need to address all three areas.

There is a dysfunctional HR function in the organization:

Sometimes, HR can put the "fun" in dysfunctional. Ever hear a top leader or HR Manager proudly assert, "We're like family here at ABC Company." Uh-oh . . . that's not necessarily a good sign! Why? Because families hide their secrets, cover for their dysfunctional members, and deny having any black sheep. Families don't get the wrong people off their bus; you can pick your friends, but not your family. So, if HR misunderstands this concept, then the HR function is likely to be dysfunctional.

HR is too reactive:

Mark Adams, founder of EnthusiAdams, warns business leaders about chasing the snake; always being reactive, trying to find out who dunnit, rather than problem solving about the basic problem. The idea is to be proactive in identifying people who don't belong on the bus, and working a plan to coach them to success or weed them out of the organization. Waiting until after grave mistakes are made, the department manager has mishandled the employee, or until after the employee has a workplace accident or applies for FMLA (yikes!), HR could be reading performance reviews, personally checking over production and performance data for staff, and identifying the wrong people for themselves – then approaching managers to assist in developing a plan.

HR gets pulled into the drama of it all:

This is where the workplace becomes “CSI – HR.” We put on our investigator's hat, and reduce a simple exchange to a full blown project. There are, of course, times when this is necessary. But, sometimes in HR we exert a need to be needed. And we want to help, so we listen . . . and listen . . . and listen – often to stories that get bigger and bigger, with more twists and turns, gaining momentum and involvement -- until it is a real mess. Sometimes in our concern and zeal we make the simple complicated. If we continue down this path we should change our name from the “HR Department” to the “Drama Department.”

3. How does/should HR help this effort?

Documentation:

Yes, Virginia, there is a need to document. HR needs to make it easy for managers to do so. Provide templates that can be used consistently across the organization; make them electronic if possible. Attach the instructions to the template. If we make it difficult, complex and mysterious, we will lack the documentation we need.

Building Relationship with managers:

Do managers think HR is there to help, or to admonish? If it is the latter, then we have a lot of work to do. Build relationships with managers. Coach them to success rather than complain when they miss a step. Help them out in difficult situations, and give them the benefit of the doubt once in a while. Remember, managers are people, too!

Understanding HR's role and top leader's expectations:

Does HR really understand what the top leader expects? Does the top leader know what HR is capable of offering the company? If there is a disconnect regarding HR with the top leader, this needs to be rectified before HR can really make a solid contribution to the culture and to the leader's objective of getting the right people on the bus, the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats. To this end, HR should constantly be selling its capabilities, educating the top leader on what should be expected, and striving to build a strong relationship with the top leader; and, throughout that process HR should be delivering consistent results in line with the leader's vision. This, after all, is what having a seat at the table is all about!

Shameless Plugs:

Book: *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, by Jim Collins

Web site to check out: www.Enthusiadams.com

The Job Center – Stimulus dollars have been released to assist with re-training and placement of displaced workers. To find out more, contact Marie Davis at DAVISM15@odjfs.state.oh.us