Solutions, *Not Policies*

By Scott Allender, SPHR

I'm a daily advocate of Employee Engagement. I regularly procure and disseminate information to my leaders on its importance, the metrics by which we measure it, and the strategies we should employ for its maximization. I do this because it serves to drive business success; not for the benefit of employee advocacy (for its own sake), nor because it feels good. I do it because study after study shows that a highly-engaged workforce produces better financial results than the less-engaged workforce. Engagement does, in fact, have a bottom-line impact. We can attract better talent and out-perform the competition with fervent dedication to the drivers of employee engagement: Robust leadership and organizational development programs, effective communication strategies, real-time feedback, and achievable goals that support individual growth and are aligned with company objectives (to name a few).

Successful achievements of the aforementioned intrinsic motivators are some of the biggest drivers of long-term employee satisfaction. Conversely, one of the biggest drivers of extreme dissatisfaction is unhappiness with company policy and the administration thereof. And there's the rub. After all, we're Human Resources. We're policy makers and, subsequent, enforcers. We're tasked with legal compliance, ensuring parity, and the defensibility of our decisions via our handbook and codes of conduct. It's the unavoidable plight of the profession; to protect the organization from itself and, even if unpopular, police the halls to be sure no one is running or chewing gum. Or, is it?

Let's face it: For a business to win in today's rapidly-changing world, agility is King. Nimbleness, quickness, liveliness, and flexibility are no longer just desired traits but have become metrics, in and of themselves, for success. However, what I've observed in the Human Resources profession often works against that model. I've been in too many meetings where at some point in the discussion about a business need or objective, an HR person eagerly proclaims, "Let's create a policy"; as if it is the means to the end. But policies, in general, are slow-moving codes and systems of governance that tend to be difficult to change. They are big ships with small rudders. They are not responsive; they are directive. In their aim to protect, they often just limit. And a business that is limited lacks agility.

If you're concerned about lawful compliance, don't be. You don't need a policy for lawful-compliance; for that, you need a process. The law is already written – How you comply is your practice; not your policy. If you've written a policy to comply with the law (unless the law, itself, states that you must create a policy for a particular practice), I would suggest that you've done some unnecessary work. I'd also suggest you may be over "nanny-ing" your organization.

A city in The Netherlands spear-headed a movement known as "Naked Streets" in 2003. The city changed 20 four-way stops into traffic-circles without signage. The result was a significant decline in the number of deaths and accidents. Since then, several other places have begun to adopt the same philosophy in their cities and have enjoyed favorable results as well. The conclusion? Street signs designed to make us feel safer, may actually make us more complacent and careless.

Creating policy is your prerogative. You can walk the halls and try to enforce your policies. You can post your own street signage via memos, E-blasts, and handbooks. But people don't follow policies. They comply with them. They don't engage over policy. More often than not, they disengage because of them. You will not help your organization achieve the necessary agility it needs through policy. In fact, you may be undermining every program and initiative you have which attempts to foster a self-organizing and nimble culture, by having a policy-heavy Human Resources department.

Let me be clear, I'm not advocating that we do away with all policies; nor am I arguing against their inevitable need in our hyper-litigious society. Sometimes we do need to write a policy or two. But policy-creation cannot be the focus of HR if the profession wishes to remain relevant and impactful. We must serve as creative solution providers. We must routinely execute real-time solutions, and those solutions must remain as flexible and agile as we need our business to be. If we are rigid like policies, failure is inevitable. Form follows function; not the other way around. The function of HR is to satisfy the business. What form that takes in your organization is up to you....

Scott Allender is an accomplished business executive with expertise in Human Capital. He is currently the Vice President of Global Human Resources for Warner Music Group, overseeing HR for two of its major divisions.

Scott began his business career in the coffee business in the mid 90's. During that time, he handled staffing, training, development, and employee relations for this private start-up, while contributing to the successful branding and growing of the business to a highly-profitable venture that would eventually be sold to a larger Company.

Scott then joined the HR team for a major music publisher. He quickly progressed into the role of strategic HR business partner. Scott is known for his ability to bring key business acumen to the table to improve organizational design, process, and capability. He continually pursues new challenges and education through various means such as, Six Sigma Green Belt training, and becoming SPHR certified in 2005 (He's been recertified twice since then).

Scott holds a Bachelor's of Science in Business from California Polytechnic University, with a degree in Human Resource Management. He lives in south LA County with his wife and daughter, and has another baby on the way!