



Making peace with the rules:

a guide to getting along with HR

IF YOU THINK THAT GETTING ALONG WITH YOUR HUMAN RESOURCES AREA 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 legalistic when trying to manage their department the way they want. However, HR can be your best friend when you are faced with a “sticky” employment dilemma and can help keep you and your company out of potential litigation issues.

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 may be forced to rely on employees who have probably never received training in turf management, probably have little interest in turf management, and whose 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 regarding the success of your field? Welcome to the world of Human Resources!

LIMITING LIABILITIES

Human Resource departments are 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 (i.e., producing top notch athletic surfaces)—something completely different than 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*; i.e., actually read a handbook; and b) are 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 5 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 that grab a quick bite and head back out to work early just because they want to. 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’s a violation all the same. When Wage and Hour investigates this type of scenario they don’t stop with one employee or for a 1-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 company/management willingly participated in the neglect of Wage and Hour laws. Your HR department almost assuredly has established a 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 when you’ve always had an understanding in your department 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). Even though we’ve done something different in the past, HR wants it done by the book from now on.” Provide copies of the policy from the employee handbook for backup; yes, your employees were given a copy of their handbook/have access online, 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 this area (employees working through lunch breaks, falsifying time cards, 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 for something for lawmakers 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 by punching him in the nose. HR policies and societal laws are established because at sometime, somewhere, someone “wasn’t playing nicely in the sandbox.”

USE THE HANDBOOK!

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 working with a manager/supervisor *before* a problem exists than after a violation/lawsuit has occurred. 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 their 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 on you 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 limits liabilities for you and your organization in the future. ■

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