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People First

People First Column: Employees are more than a resource

Inspiring and valuing employees leads to loyalty, business success

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Does anyone remember when personnel departments became “Human Resources?” Wasn’t the term coined to “soften up,” or humanize, the sound of a corporate department? It seems, however, the words we chose have had the reverse effect: human resources, literally the flesh-and-blood equivalent of steel and cash? We have all heard the idiom, “Don’t take this personally.” The fact that we have all heard that saying is precisely why people think for the most part “We” (the people) against “Them” (business).

“Up in the Air” was a hit at the box office. It’s about people who fire people for a living: a stranger outside of the company walks in with a packet and asks you to clean out your desk. It’s said very eloquently, but nonetheless the message is very clear: You are an expendable resource.

Visit any Web site or read a business blog and you will find rigid commitment to building “high-performance” organizations. What exactly does “high performance” mean? How do businesses expect to achieve this without winning the hearts and souls of all stakeholders? In reality, most companies frankly choke originality, curb ambition and undermine loyalty. Can any business truly be “high-performing” and not understand that people need to be recognized as valuable and that they do their best when coupled with a leader who is known to value truth, courage and honor — or does “high-performing” strictly translate into commercial values: advantage, focus, discipline, accountability and efficiency?

People aren’t just numbers

There is nothing wrong with these goals, but do these goals quicken your pulse? Are they “good” in any cosmic sense? Ponders Gary Hamel in his article for the *Wall Street Journal*, “The Hole in the Soul of Business”: What goals inspire greatness?

Human relations experts agree that people in HR departments who understand there’s no business without people have historically not always been very good at making a business case for the “soft side.”

James Nieves, vice president of human resources at [OmniFlight](#), has been in the people business for 35 years and has run HR for companies that produce \$900 million in annual revenue. He thinks business is finally getting it. “Who can rightly argue that the people who touch your customers are the most important people in the company? Yes, my attitudes are humanistic, but more importantly they serve business.”

Nieves has great stories. An airline had a very happy customer who had flown with that airline for 30 years. On a routine business trip, the customer’s bags were lost twice; he was shuffled from person to person, insulted and ignored. In the course of 36 hours, the company had lost a great customer forever.

At any point of this disaster, a person could have saved the customer-airline relationship. No one cared.

How the heart plays into business has a lot to do with management’s style of running the company — how much of the time executives spend leading and how much time managing. Managing has to do with matters of the brain; leading has to do with matters of the heart.

Lead, don't manage

Leading is about making sure, first of all, that the company is engaged in changing people's lives for the better. As employees become aware that they have everything to do with the company's success, it lights their fire. That inner flame ignites imagination, creativity and ambition. They feel it's "their" company, and they take ownership of the customers.

Southwest Airlines affords us great examples. Yet, what defines Southwest's culture is how the company treats its colleagues. In 2008, Southwest hired 4,000 people, and in 2009, 400. The training division of Southwest constitutes a small army. What happened to those people? Jeff Lamb, chief people officer, quickly opened up the other departments and the people flowed in to do whatever needed to be done, in a program they called "Loan Your Luv." "Management needs to get out of the way. Soft leadership skills versus hard is an antiquated way of thinking. People are at the heart of all productivity," Lamb said.

Lamb remembers: "I was at Southwest about a month, when a cowbell appeared on my desk. I was spontaneously ushered in the direction of the main hall. A man was returning to work after being out on extended sick leave. We rang him into the building and then we all went back to work. I don't think anyone who was in that hall will ever forget that moment."

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