

We Have To Stop Managing Like This!

The work force changed but the way we manage people didn't! That's a strong statement, but not far from the truth. Of course, some people and some organizations have modified in time with the changing work force, but most have not. Too many of the policies and practices used day-to-day to "manage" people still assume a predominantly similar young to middle-aged, male work force, driven by basic economics and the protestant work ethic, and often providing for a non-working spouse and family (or even a working spouse whose work is of economic but not career importance). These assumptions are a lot less true of the work force than they used to be.

Our work force has changed more significantly in the last decade than at any time in the previous three. That's a lot of change in a relatively short time. It's actually been changing all along, but the volume and magnitude are more evident recently. The work force is fundamentally different in its male/female and cultural composition; in its age dispersion and aging trend; in its level of education; in many of its basic values; in its marital and parental status mix; in its perspective on the use of time, value of work and motivation; and in the nature of the jobs held. In different geographic areas, industries and occupations:

- There are more older, more middle-aged and fewer younger workers.
- There are more women in more kinds of jobs.
- There are more ethnic minorities.
- There are more informed workers.
- There are more workers with nontraditional living arrangements.
- And there are more workers who want to participate in decisions, who value time differently and want greater fulfillment quickly.

As these trends become more evident, they shape a new work force of great diversity, one quite different from the past (male, married, younger, non-working wife, children, less informed, "work now, enjoy later"). We haven't lost the typical worker of the past, we have just added more types.

The work force has changed, but many of the policies and practices for managing human resources have not. We must find ways to be more individualized, flexible and sensitive to the more diverse set of factors driving today's workers. The need to understand your work force and its differences is essential to greater personalization in your organization.

Our approaches to managing people are influenced by assumptions about workers and philosophies about people. So much of what developed in the past was theoretically based on managing others, control of information and behavior, the use of status and hierarchy, rules for all people, consistency for everyone, and making choices for people. Today we need models and methods that recognize different needs, provide greater equality across organization levels, include and inform people, offer options and self-choice, and lead and influence others rather than manage and control. Outdated management practices need to be changed by policy, through leadership, culture change and/or training. Productivity, profit, commitment and satisfaction all suffer when people are turned off, unrewarded or live with many unmet needs... which is just the case when policies, benefits, supervision practices and work design reflect little understanding of or sensitivity to contemporary workers and their life situations; when these practices were developed to be effective for our "forefathers".

We have to stop managing like this. Too many benefit programs still assume one breadwinner per household and many are still male and marriage oriented. People are still placed in jobs in which they have little interest and to which their work styles aren't suited. And we wonder why productivity is low? All too often, jobs and compensation structures are designed with "scientific management roots," leaving rigid, narrow options and constraints on mobility, enrichment and enlargement. It's embarrassing to admit, but most workers still have little involvement in even minor decisions affecting their work. In many cases, participation only comes

through adversarial conditions or labor turmoil—a condition reminiscent of the college student participation movement of the sixties. Finally, it is quite appalling continually to run into talented blue and white collar workers, in large and small organizations, who receive little meaningful information for doing their jobs in anywhere near a useful time frame; or who have no regular channels for receiving performance or personal feedback; or who have not participated in an appraisal in the last year or two; or who don't know the company goals; or who can't get career-oriented training approved... and the list goes on as we all know.

It seems to me that human resource professionals need to take more initiative. Potentially we can influence policies, organization cultures and certainly training. Those seem to be the most viable short-range avenues to affect management practices. Supervisors and middle managers today are caught in a bind. Few have had training emphasizing the diverse work force, flexibility and different needs. Few are equipped to manage with the changing work force and most have only antiquated policies and few options with which to work when they do recognize the need. My sense is that we need policy support, new tools and options and different training for the people who manage people. Human resource professionals belong in the middle of this one. What are you doing?

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It seems to me... is a series of reflections on current issues in the human resource field.

