

Tips & tactics from 2004 SHRM conference

The HR Specialist joined more than 12,000 HR professionals in New Orleans this summer for the annual Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conference. Here are some quick tips and strategies we picked up: Heed 3 new trends in exit interviews

Lynn Nemser, head of Partners in Performance, a Pittsburgh-based HR consulting firm, said organizations are moving toward three big changes in exit interviews this year:

1. More post-exit interviews. Employees' final days and weeks on the job are too emotional, plus employees may not be as truthful while still employed. That's why more organizations are hosting exit interviews after employees leave, typically 30 to 90 days after.
2. Shift from internal to external. Employees are more comfortable when not doing an in-office review.
3. Shift from interview to survey as primary tool. Paper surveys are much cheaper than face-to-face or phone interviews, and they offer greater perceived confidentiality. Plus, it's easier to track trends.

Take the 'T-shirt test' to evaluate communication

What are your organization's core values? In many cases, the values that HR and organization execs say are most important don't translate into what employees believe.

Author and HR consultant Al Lucia said organizations should apply the "T-shirt test" to test their core values. What HR is telling employees goes on the front, but what employees really believe goes on the back. The goal is to have both messages be the same. But that doesn't happen often.

Example: At the University of Tennessee, the HR department stressed dedication, research and academic excellence. But what did its employees believe was the university's priority? Lucia surveyed them and one word came out: football.

Lucia also encouraged HR professionals to become more stringent in their interviewing and hiring efforts. His belief: "You can hire tough and manage easy, or hire easy and manage tough."

Analyze raise requests with simple formula

Managers at your organization are frequently hit with salary raise requests. Rather than giving knee-jerk "Yes" or "No" answers, teach them to analyze each request using a five-letter formula:

R = Responsibility.

A = Achievement.

I = Initiative.

S = Skills.

E = Experience, equity.

Empowering employees sparks production

Actor/director Christopher Reeve explained to SHRM attendees how his life-altering spinal-cord injury provides an example of HR's role in the corporate world: "There may be a time when you have to learn a whole new way of doing things. I had to learn a new way to communicate. It had to be based on trust and confidence."

He used the example of teaching his 5-year-old son how to ride a bike just by explaining the mechanics, not by showing him. "The way to manage," Reeve said, "is to empower people around you so they feel their contribution is absolutely vital to the success of the mission."

When to tell your CEO to keep quiet

Have you ever wanted to tape your CEO's mouth shut when he or she speaks to employees? You're not alone. The top dogs can sometimes bark out completely contradictory messages from HR.

A SHRM conference attendee said her company's owner constantly walks up to employees and says, "Hey, ya makin' any money for me today?"

The HR person eventually screwed up enough courage to ask the boss to stop saying that. Reason: It made employees feel like they were working simply to line the CEO's pocket. Not the most inspiring vision for an employee.

Don't try to motivate employees solely with money

Would you work 10 percent more hours for 10 percent more pay? Christopher Lee, HR director for Bates College in Lewiston, Maine, asked nearly 300 HR people in the audience that simple question. Very few hands (about 5 percent) went up.

Lee's response: "So how do you expect employees to be motivated solely by more money?"

The lesson: Feedback, recognition and challenging work are just as, if not more, important than cash in motivating employees.

What will Congress do for the rest of 2004?

Don't expect much action from Congress on employment-related issues as its legislative year comes to a close soon. With election season heating up, members of Congress will want to head back home to press the flesh, not write legislation. (Adjournment is tentatively set for Oct. 1.) Three of the hottest topics on Congress's plate, according to SHRM.

1. Minimum-wage hike. Democrats want to raise the federal minimum wage from \$5.15 to \$7.00 an hour in three steps over two years. Strong support exists in the Senate, but less in the House. Still, election years often spark such populist actions. Stay tuned.
2. FMLA for reservist 'issues.' A bill that would allow employees to take FMLA leave for issues related to a military reservist call-up (spouse called up, etc.) doesn't likely have the votes to pass this year.
3. Social Security number privacy. This bill would prevent companies from displaying employees' Social Security numbers to the general public (on badges, timecards, etc.). This won't likely become law this year, but your organization would be wise to do it now anyway.