Half of American employees think HR is not trustworthy

From day one of employment, the human resources department plays a vital role in a worker's organizational experience. Companies encourage employees to seek out HR professionals for assistance with any issues related to their job -- questions about paychecks and benefits, clarification on policies, problems with co-workers or management, and concerns over workplace culture and operations, to name a few.

Initiating such interactions requires that workers see HR as a safe place that will thoughtfully address matters. Unfortunately, such perception seems lacking in many places.

In a recent study conducted by the career site Zety, half of American employees said they think their HR department is not trustworthy. Furthermore, 69 percent of those polled do not believe HR advocates for employees, and 48 percent believe HR focuses on procedures rather than people.

Other eye-opening information derived from the nearly 1,000 people surveyed includes:

- 37% of people would not report being sexually harassed at work.
- 43% would not report discrimination.
- 84% would not report a fellow worker not doing his work/putting in the proper hours.
- 57% would not report interpersonal issues with boss.
- 63% would not report interpersonal challenges with a coworker.

- 60% would not report a co-worker for stealing from a company.

Problems of not being trusted

"It's disheartening to see surveys/reports in which employees believe HR is not trustworthy. I don't want to believe it, but I know it is true," says Keri Ohlrich, CEO of the HR consulting company Abbracci Group and co-author of *The Way of the HR Warrior*. "Next to an employee's manager, the role of HR is to advocate for employees as well as organizations. Unfortunately, there have been quite a few instances of TV shows/movies in which HR is depicted as a lazy, incompetent, check-the-box function. That, coupled with unpleasant experiences people have faced, makes it easy to see why some lack trust in HR."

Similarly, the nature of the tasks HR must perform sometimes lends the department to being viewed as "the bad guy." As noted by Jenna Carson, HR manager at Music Grotto, "It's often the case that HR departments have to be the ones to break bad news, to make difficult decisions, and to implement changes that aren't necessarily popular, and this can easily lead to a lack of trust from employees towards their colleagues in HR."

A chief danger of employees not trusting HR is that much more may be going on at the company than meets the eye. Instances of workplace harassment or discrimination that might have been nipped in the bud at an early stage may not come to the organization's attention until a fed-up employee slaps a lawsuit. Likewise, a business may suffer from stolen items or data, poor morale, and high turnover when employees fail to speak up out of fear that HR will not take them seriously or maintain confidentiality.

How to change perceptions

Trust develops when people consistently witness thoughtful, respectful behavior. HR departments wishing to increase their trustworthiness should not expect overnight results. Rather, they must demonstrate reliability and true concern over time.

As with any relationship, a solid first step is better communication.

"The more information HR can give to employees, the better," Carson says. "Be clear about what is expected of them, and what they should expect of you. Make sure that the company's values are clear and are communicated effectively with all employees. HR is responsible for making sure that the company's actions reflect its values, and if employees see this in action, then it will go a long way to helping them believe what you say."

Other trust-building measures for HR include:

- **Take all complaints seriously.** Give the person who comes forth your full attention. Listen and ask questions to reassure him that he is being heard. Follow up later to offer details on progress or to reassess the situation.
- **Value privacy.** Handle employee data with care. Refrain from all gossip. Recount sensitive conversations only to those who truly need to know.
- **Eliminate fear of retaliation.** Forget people coming forth in the future if stories circulate about job security problems for those who "rock the boat." Welcome and thank those who do come forward, and set up anonymous ways to report potential problems for those fearful of identification.
- **Deal with people fairly.** Apply company rules consistently to avoid charges of favoritism. Examine hiring processes to ensure commitment to diversity and giving all qualified applicants the same chance.
- **Act as a trusted advisor.** Know your job, and put a premium on providing timely, thorough answers to inquiries. Address issues pertinent to what is going on at the company or in society at large, such as by putting out clear information on health insurance coverage during the COVID pandemic. Remind people that HR is there and wants to help.

- **Get off on the right foot during onboarding.** Impressions form quickly, so aim to make solid ones from day one. Demonstrate competency, concern, and a genuine desire to be helpful.
- **Listen and learn.** Dig deeper into employee perceptions of HR through surveys and focus groups. Acquire input on how the department can best serve staff. Whenever possible, offer choices on things like potential new benefits or possible procedural changes – people like to have a voice on issues that concern them.

The benefits of a trusted HR department

When trust and good communication rule, workplaces prosper. Employees know they have a place to turn, and the company becomes more likely to find out about potential issues before they become problematic. When changes need to be instituted, the organization has an easier time getting employees on board.

As Ohlrich summarizes, "When HR is truly dialed into the needs of the business and the employees which they serve, the effects can be powerful. Leaders and employees know they have a support system they can reach out to at any time. People feel they have an advocate within the organization (besides their manager) and have the confidence of knowing that when situations arise, they are addressed. Employees who feel supported and valued are more productive and happier, which means they go home to their families happier. The culture of an organization is not the sole responsibility of HR, but they do play a large role in partnering with leadership to create a culture in which employees feel they can do their best work."