

Eileen's Lessons

A compendium of her favorites. Volume #1



The **one** source for
human resources



The Story Behind the Lessons

By: Eileen Levitt, President of The HR Team

You see, I'm a runner. I haven't always been a runner, but I run now. And for any of you out there who jog or walk your dog, you likely find yourself thinking about a wide range of things, many of which have nothing to do with what you're doing. I mean, come on, do you really want to spend your time thinking about how badly your feet hurt as they hit the pavement, or how many times your furry friend has stopped to "smell the roses"? I don't think so. It's natural for us all to drift off or to daydream.

Oftentimes, I find these to be my most creative moments. I guess it's because my mind is free of distractions — phones aren't ringing, emails aren't dinging and it's in these golden moments that I think of how life imitates, not art, but HR, you know...human resources.

I know, I know...I'm probably one of the few people in the world that dreams about HR but hey, it's what I do! And if you really stopped to think about it, it's what you do too, whether you recognize it or not. You see, each and every day, we all have interactions or make decisions that have direct or indirect HR implications. You may not realize it in the moment, but it's true.

And that's the point of these lessons — to shed some light on common HR scenarios so that you can be on the look out for them, and be better prepared to handle them. If you need help, now you know who to call. Happy reading!

- *Eileen*



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The Difference Between Baking & Cooking



I like to cook and bake. I didn't used to be all that good at it, but over the years, I've gotten better. Baking and cooking are very different though.

Baking tends to be more precise than cooking. With baking, many times the ingredients may or may not make sense, but they are required to create a “chemical reaction”. In addition, the order they are added is also critical.

For example, when you're making chocolate chip cookies, you need to mix your flour, baking soda and salt together in a separate bowl before it is added to the ingredients. Let's say you don't follow this order or you delete the salt or use baking powder instead of soda or your ingredients are out of date.

Well, the cookies, just won't look or taste right. What if it is raining?

Well, you may need to modify your ingredients or cooking time. High altitude? Same.

Electrical or gas oven? Same.

And sometimes, even when you think you did everything right, and adjusted for the new environment, surroundings, and you thought your items were fresh and correct,

the cookies just didn't turn out the way you thought they would. And you have no idea why, because cookies can be so temperamental, even for the experienced baker.

Hmm. Sounds like the workplace—you have the way things are supposed to be policies, but they may be out of date, and the environment has changed. And no matter what you do, things just don't turn out the way you thought they would. Perhaps it is time to call an experienced baker, I mean HR.



Precision's Role in Attracting & Retaining the Best People



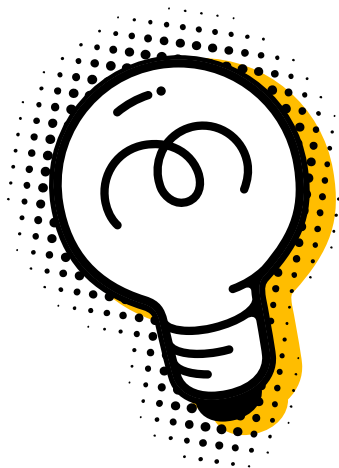
There are some things in life where precision doesn't matter and some things, where precision does matter.

Let's take your shoes, for example. In order to walk comfortably (and in a straight line) it's important to wear your shoes on the correct feet. However, it's pretty obvious when you've goofed and it's an easy fix. Right shoe goes on right foot, left shoe on left foot and away you go.

But what about other things? Like say diapers. Many, many years ago, a diaper was a diaper, it didn't matter which way it was put on. You put the cloth diaper on the baby, fastened it up and boom, you're ready. However, diaper science (I don't really know if there are diaper scientists, but there must be) has changed, and there is a definite way to put them on a baby. Failure to recognize the diaper top from the bottom, can result in a mess that you just don't want to have.

Well, it's the same for managing employees. For example, in the past, whether you had flexible work hours, work from home availability and part time options, didn't seem to impact companies in a noticeable way. However, as the job market has tightened and a different generation has entered the workplace, failure to have these options can result in the inability to attract and retain the best people, and that can be an HR mess!

PS: I've heard that cloth diapers have made a comeback, and they now have definite tops and bottoms as well.



Sometimes We Need to Pump Our Own Gas



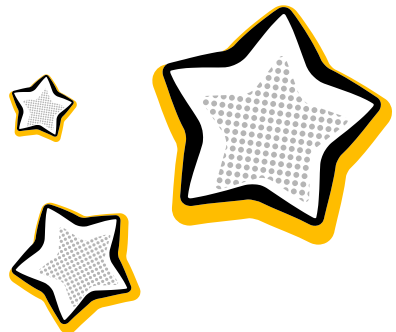
When my cousin and I were still in college, I helped her relocate her new car from New Jersey to St. Louis.

Yes. Road trip! We packed up the car: a cooler full of Diet Coke and mini snickers. We had a bag full of coins for emergency phone calls, cash for tolls, food and incidentals, our AAA card and AAA Triptik, super cool sun glasses, and who knows what else. We were ready.

We rolled out of New Jersey with a full tank of gas and then headed west. We were ready until we got somewhere in Pennsylvania and needed gas and saw something we didn't expect – self service. Where were the full service stations? Oh oh. You see, in New Jersey it was (and still is today) illegal to pump your own gas. What did we do? We improvised, we proceeded to take the giant hose “thing” out of the pump and attempted to fill the car, only to find ourselves spraying gas all over who knows where.

All of a sudden, a man ran over, looked at us and said, “You’re from Jersey aren’t you?” “Yes.” “Let me she show you how to do this.” And he did. By the time we got to St. Louis, we were gas pumping pros. No joke. When I got back to New Jersey, I was bragging to friends about pumping gas.

I know, it’s funny now, but as managers, we need to teach our people, but then let them loose to make mistakes, learn, grow, and pump (and spill) their own gas. By giving our people the freedom to fail, and accepting those failures as a normal part of employee development, we are showing our people that we want them to learn and grow into productive employees.



When Communication Fails to Communicate




I heard a funny story from a relative a number of years ago.

He had dictated a letter to his assistant, and in the letter, he stated something like “Generally, we can....” When he received the letter back from his assistant for signature, the letter stated, “General Lee can...”

Funny isn't it how two people who are in the same room can hear something completely different? I wish I could say that communication failures are a rare occasion in the work place. However, as we all know, they happen often.

Fixing this issue was an easy one. Solving complex organizational communication and performance issues are not always quite as simple.

Good thing The HR Team is here.



“The HR Team provides valuable expertise in all aspects of human resources—recruitment and hiring, policy development, and benefits administration. Their guidance in restructuring Reading Is Fundamental’s core departments and job descriptions has enabled us to become a more dynamic, forward-thinking organization.”

- Alicia Levi, President & CEO
Reading is Fundamental

Putting Complaints in the Right Perspective



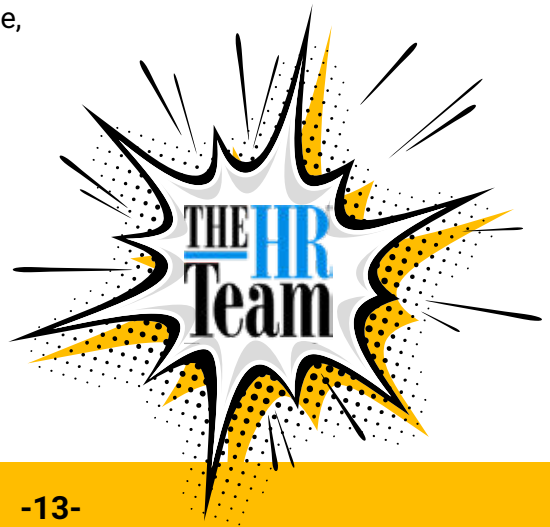
I recently spoke with a friend who was upset by complaints from her co-workers.

What did the co-workers complain about? The variety of fruit available for them to add to their water. Mind you, it is this friend's responsibility to stock the kitchen with supplies, snacks, etc. She was simply unaware of the "need" for a fully stocked fruit supply.

What did I tell her? Many years ago, I worked at a place where employees complained to management about the variety of pen colors available to them. They did not complain about the lack of pens, pencils or other tools needed to do their jobs, they had those. Their complaint/demand was they should have access to the entire rainbow of colors beyond the standard blue, black, red and even the purple that was supplied.

As a result of that early career experience I learned to accept and prioritize employee complaints as "lack of pens" or "color of pens". Meaning, are the employees complaining about not having the tools to perform their jobs effectively or is it a personal preference?

There are those who will always complain as some people actually need things to complain about. But putting the complaint in the right perspective can help us better determine a response. Therefore, I suggested that she reframe the complaint. If you want to know what I told her you will need to contact The HR Team to find out.



Locker Room Conversations and Compensation Chatter



Have you ever heard the expression “locker room conversation”?

That saying can apply to compensation as well.

Case in point: I left my first post-college job after a year and began working for a startup company. I was 23 years old at the time. By changing jobs, I had gotten a decent bump in pay, not huge, but a salary that was commensurate with a college degree and one year of experience.

Imagine my surprise when I heard from a peer who discovered that I was making six figures. Wow! That would have been very impressive. Where did this person hear that figure? From her father, who heard it from my father. When I spoke to my father and asked if the story was true he said “Yes, I had to. Her father said that she was already making \$80k.”

Quite comical isn't it? Many times as managers, we are approached by employees who “heard that so and so is making more than them.”

As a manager, whether the information is correct or not, what do you do?

Many companies will try to institute policies prohibiting employees from discussing their compensation. Aside from being illegal, policies of that nature simply don't work. Human nature is to discuss things with peers.

So what else do you do?

Contact The HR Team, of course!



Never Say Never



A number of years ago, my husband and I went out to a restaurant and saw a young family with a baby.

The baby had some toys in his hand and then threw them on the ground, prompting the parent to then immediately pick up the toys, followed by the baby throwing them down again, the parent picking them up... you get the idea.

At that point in our lives, we didn't have children, and couldn't understand why anyone would pick up the toys when they fell. "Obviously, the baby doesn't want them or he wouldn't throw them onto the ground." We thought, "Why not just leave them on the ground and be done with it?"

Once we had children, we learned that the baby cries when the toys are not returned and the 2 minutes of the toys being placed back in his hands were the only 2 minutes of peace we had at the dinner table. So for some peace and quiet, we continued to pick up the toys again and again. Why did we even think we could go to a restaurant anyway?

In the workforce we also learn that things aren't always as simple. I can recall a colleague telling me, "One day, when I own my own business, I will negotiate with each employee a vacation and leave policy that works best for them."

What happened? That person did become a business owner and realized that keeping track of 10 and then 30 different leave and benefit packages isn't as easy as it seems. And my favorite, "What I promised is being interpreted differently by my employees. How did that happen?" "Maybe written offer letters aren't such a bad idea."

Realization – never say never. Good HR policies and awesome HR people to help you create them are out there, and they can help you pick up all the toys that have fallen on the floor. Need help drafting policies, offer letters, and an overall HR infrastructure? Why not contact The HR Team?

When Common Sense, isn't So Common



One day, when I returned to my office after attending a business luncheon, I had an email from an acquaintance.

The subject line read, “You left your umbrella”. It was an overcast day, but not raining, so it wouldn’t have surprised me to discover that I had left my umbrella at the business function. Upon opening the email I was greeted by an extremely graphic photo of something that clearly wasn’t an umbrella. Not only that, it didn’t originate from the acquaintance (at least I don’t think/hope it didn’t).

What did I do? I jumped back and gasped rather loudly (I was in shock after all) and a co-worker promptly came over to make sure I was ok. Her response, “Eileen, that’s what happens when you mix your day job with your night job.” Of course, we laughed it off as I deleted the email and added the sender to my junk mail list.



Instead of deleting the email, what if I:

- Forwarded it to a co-worker? And that co-worker sent it along to another co-worker?
- Printed the email and posted it on the wall of my office?
- Printed the email and “accidentally” left it on the printer?
- Made the image my (employer owned) laptop screen saver?
- Clicked the links in the email to whatever site it was advertising?

That wouldn’t happen you say? Common sense would tell most of us to delete it and move on. If only common sense were common in the workforce. Need a sexual harassment policy, electronic communications policy and more?

Why not contact The HR Team to discuss the best approach to modern technology issues in the workplace?



"The HR Team has been a trusted partner for Plano-Coudon for many years now. They have helped us to document our HR processes, provide professional HR services to our employees and grow the sophistication of our HR program to match the continued growth of our company. We view the HR Team as an extension of our company and look forward to our continued relationship."

- Ryan Coudon, Owner & Founder
Plano-Coudon Construction



Founded in 1996, The HR Team is a Maryland-based human resources outsourcing firm committed to developing strategic, customized solutions that respond to the unique needs and cultures of organizations of all types and sizes. Available as a one-source alternative to an in-house HR department or on an à la carte project basis, the company's flexible service models address the full spectrum of HR needs that many organizations struggle to address.

The HR Team helps clients achieve their highest level of success by providing value-driven human resources services that leave them time to focus on what they do best: directing business growth and profitability. Headquartered in Columbia, Maryland, the firm serves all of Maryland, Washington, DC, and Virginia.



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