

What Employees Really Want!

written by HR Banana

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When defining the basic functions of HR, **compensation** is always listed. While the lists differ, they almost always include recruitment, benefits, compensation, employee relations, legal compliance, and training/development.

We consider compensation as being concerned with wages and salary- the fair and equitable payment to employees for hours worked. However, I have come to discover that there is another hidden function of many HR departments that is directly related to another definition of compensation.

Compensation - another definition

Compensate can also mean *"to counterbalance", "correct", or "make up for"*. An example of this use of the word would be *"John compensated for his hearing loss by using a hearing aid"*. This definition of compensation is often the hidden function of HR departments.

In many cases, it works in subtle opposition to the business goals and objectives of the organization as HR feels it is their role to *counterbalance* or *make up for* what senior leadership or operational management is trying to accomplish.

The unspoken message is that we are sorry for what we are doing so we will do something nice to make up for this injustice.

Early in my career, I thought part of the responsibility of HR was to maintain high morale. In my mind, a satisfied workforce could be maintained by *compensating* for all of the parts of the work that might create dissatisfaction. Here is an example of my approach.

An example of the wrong approach

We had transitioned from a not-for-profit hospital to for-profit ownership. Staffing had been reduced and the employees were getting used to the new normal! At the same time, we were going through a nursing shortage. Nursing staff were

working long hours.

What to do? I thought about the long hours being worked by the staff and the additional stress in their lives. I realized that by borrowing an idea from one of our large competitors, HR could be a hero and help reduce stress in their lives. We could start a grocery shopping service.

Employees could drop off their shopping list at the beginning of the shift, and pick up their completed orders at the end. We could eliminate this personal task leading to reduced stress! Reduced stress would result in a more satisfied workforce, right?

The CEO was wrong

I took my idea to the CEO. My argument being that since work was so stressful, we could show our concern (**compensate**) by eliminating another task in their lives. He looked at me for a moment, and said, *"Steve, employees don't want someone to do their shopping. What they really want is to come into work and perform their jobs with as little hassle as possible"*.

Shot down! Clearly he did not understand good employee relations. I did what every HR professional should do—I sought out support for my position! I joined three RNs for coffee in the cafeteria. I shared with them my great idea on how I was trying to make up for all the hard work and stress they were experiencing by starting a grocery shopping service.

I told them that the CEO had torpedoed the idea and told me that what employees really wanted was to be able to come to work and do their jobs with as little hassle as possible. Of course, my presentation of the conversation was clearly intended to lead them into agreement with my point of view.

The CEO was right

The nurses looked at each other and then said to me, "the CEO is right. That is exactly what we want!" I couldn't believe it -they were all in agreement. They went on to say that if someone would focus on their jobs, fixing work processes, correcting the illogical flow (and sometimes layout of the physical work area), and eliminating unnecessary paperwork, meetings, etc. they would be thrilled!

This was an “aha” moment for me and transformed my view of what HR could and should be doing. Of course we still had parties and events to have fun and boost morale. We still emphasized good employee relations. But we added some new skill sets to the department.

People vs. work focus

A simplistic way of classifying management styles used to be that one was either people-focused or work-focused. As though they had to be mutually exclusive. It was assumed that HR professionals had to be ‘people-focused’.

We left the work focus up to the line managers. These individuals may have skills in their respective clinical areas, but did not have the skills related to job design, process improvement, incentives, etc. –the very core of what work and the job was all about.

We determined that HR would focus on the work as much as on the individual doing it. Process improvement, work redesign, etc. became tools we could offer the line manager. What do you think the reaction of line staff is when they see you focusing on the *worthwhileness* of the job rather than a single focus on their performance—especially when it is regards to poorly designed work processes?

Does this focus pay off?

In my personal experience, it has worked every time. Twice, organizations I have been involved with were #1 and #2 on Best Places to Work lists. In every single organization, employee satisfaction scores increased following a demonstrated commitment to improving the work itself. .

Stop compensating for the working conditions and start fixing them. I guarantee you that is what employees really want. An additional benefit is that this approach shows the real value HR can add to the organization.