



Feature: The Five Biggest Lies in HR

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Commentary: You hear them all the time: 'Work/life balance is HR's responsibility.' 'Our company wants only "A" players.' And other falsehoods. HR has spawned narratives that make the function seem like a cross between Mother Teresa and Stuart Smalley.

By Kris Dunn

I'm here today not to give you the normal PR spin about how strategic the HR function can be, but instead to call BS on the biggest lies in HR. It's not that HR people want to lie. It's just that we've created our own prison: the urban myths that have developed over the last 20 years as the HR function has matured.

And so we're trapped. We've spawned narratives that make the HR function seem like a cross between Mother Teresa and Stuart Smalley, while the team members—aka employees—we serve actually need more tough love, a cross between Jack Welch and Dennis Miller. They need that little thing called the truth, effectively washed down with a bit of leadership, personality and, at times, humor.

I know that you're one of the good HR pros who doesn't subscribe to the lies. But humor me as I move through the list, and we'll see whether you're part of the problem when we wrap this up:

Lie No. 1: We're responsible for the work/life balance of team members. I believe it was a man named Jack Welch who infuriated a bunch of HR pros at SHRM 2009 in New Orleans by daring to say that "there's no such thing as work/life balance. There are work/life choices." I've never met a star who didn't absolutely outwork the competition for promotions, yet in our HR universe there's endless talk about the search for balance.

The truth: Employees are responsible for their own work/life balance, and if they want more money, promotions and fame, they're going to have to work harder than those around them. That holds true even if they're as smart as Al Gore, who had to work really hard to create the Internet and get invited to SHRM 2010 as one of the keynote speakers. If you happen to be a team member reading this, the reality is that the business world is chaotic, and everyone's winging it, to a certain extent. Most companies try to staff at levels relative to the work at hand (more revenue always helps in that regard), but it's always going to feel like a free-for-all at times. Or, as Neutron Jack might say, it's your choice. Either you work hard and create the Internet, or you don't.

Lie No. 2: It's the company's desire to provide strong benefits to all team members. How many shades of gray are there on the color wheel? While we like to take care of team members, if it wasn't part of the American health care system and a competitive necessity related to talent, employers would be out of the benefits business so fast it would make the collapse of Martha Coakley in Massachusetts seem glacial in comparison. As someone who has been fortunate enough to run a self-insured health care plan in a smaller business environment and witness the humanity firsthand, I can tell you the biggest component to this lie is our unwillingness to hold employees accountable for their own health. HR professionals talk about our cost increases during open enrollment, but most of us never really try to change employee behavior through incentives or penalties.

The truth: If we had the guts, we'd tell employees: We're not Mom. We only provide benefits because it's an expectation we have to meet in order to compete in the talent game. We have little to no control

over insurance costs incurred, and due to our collective unwillingness to penalize smokers and team members who are gold members at Krispy Kreme, we never will. Employees have to take the cost increases we give them as a result, and if we ever get brave enough to try to change the behavior of the outliers, we'll find we're too late due to a legislative environment that protects those making unhealthy choices. Wow, that was depressing to write.

Lie No. 3: We're into pay for performance. Everyone loves seeing a high performer get a 10 percent raise just for being a star—a reward that's unrelated to a promotion. It doesn't happen enough, and the reason is pretty simple: In this Darwinian world we call global business, cost pressure is everywhere. As a result, we've got to budget for salary increases and then live by the budget to make sure razor-thin margins stay intact. That means that in order to give Sally the superstar an 8 percent increase at review time, we've got to give nothing to Johnny and Rickey, who are good cogs in the wheel, but average at best.

The truth: We (business leaders and HR pros) need average performers to make the business formula work. In a world where 90 percent of team members think they're in the top 10 percent of all performers, we're screwed from the jump. We'd rather find unbudgeted money for the star than tell the average performers they're getting nothing, which is what it takes to put pure pay for performance in place within a merit budget system. Our managers are unwilling to do that, and we're unwilling as HR pros (perhaps rightfully so) to be a Han Solo-style mercenary.

Lie No. 4: We want only "A" players. I gave Neutron Jack some love earlier, but now allow me now to take a Tonya Harding-like whack at his kneecaps. Like many of you, I love the sexy GE thought leadership and the Netflix slides that say you're either up or out. I'd love to say that our companies should be on a quest to fill our ranks with nothing but "A" players. There's just this one little problem with this theory.

The truth: "All 'A' players" doesn't work. We can't find enough of them, and even if we could, the world needs ditch diggers too. We need steady people who come into the office and crank out a solid day's work, don't bitch and don't act like divas when the company doesn't stop the operation to thank them personally every Tuesday. Granted, we still have the little issue with 90 percent of team members thinking they're "A" players, but that's a puzzle to solve another day. For now, we appreciate the fact that employees understand where to put their noses: to the grindstone.

Lie No. 5: Everyone's equal here. It's true that we are the stewards of ensuring discrimination doesn't occur in the organizations that we serve as HR pros. While the world's still not a perfect place, the American workplace has progressed tremendously when it comes to people of different backgrounds having equal opportunity to succeed. However, it gets dicey once individual performance becomes visible. At that point, no one is truly equal; people actually make different levels of contribution to the enterprise.

The truth: Everyone's equal until we see business results, then decisions get made and conflicts are resolved with an eye toward who produces. The good news is that producing results is a process that is free of race, gender or national origin bias. The bad news is that it feels unfair that someone with a drinking problem gets three strikes instead of being thrown out at two, all because he was the top-performing salesperson nationally. Welcome to the show, kid, where the curveballs curve and all the hotels have room service.

That's my list of the top lies in HR. If you're a good HR pro and don't feel like you fib every day, I've got one question for you: If you don't actively pitch the lies outlined above, do you actively preach the truth?

If the answer is no, you've got work to do before you're part of the solution.

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