

Candidate – Centric Staffing

Requires Symbols and Perspectives That Create “Environmental Draw”

Sometimes, it is all in the Name Game!

H. Michael Boyd, Ph.D.

Companies desiring to attract and hire the best candidates must first be employers that have built a sense of commitment and loyalty on the part of employees convincing them that they are held in high regard. Positive symbols and images need to be used. Negative and oppressive terms and images need to be avoided. Workers are contributors, and they demand respect. Their work is voluntary, and they may quit. Although this may seem an issue of semantics, a negative image or perception is symbolic and gives the exact opposite message to employees from that which a company needs to create loyalty and commitment in order to have a competitive workforce. This perception is what is perceived by both internal and external candidates. A positive environment will create a positive employment brand and draw in candidates. What you call employees is what they will become. Associate, Colleague, Member, Teammate, Human Capital, Asset, Employee, lackey, Talent, People, etc. etc.... You get the idea. We are always looking for the term that makes employees and prospective employees feel valued and important.

Introduction

An example of the importance of what people and groups of people are called can be found in the evolution of the "HR" function. Over the past several decades many renaming efforts have aimed to make the human resources function one that suggests more prestige, power, authority, and status. The change from "personnel administration" to "human resources management" was reflective of the change in the nature of the work as it became more professional and consultative than administrative. Some would argue that people are not resources and that human resources professionals don't manage them, making "human resources management" inaccurate.

Many executive HR professionals prefer the term "human relations management" because that is really the core work of HR in the 21st century. For a number of years the designation of "business partner" was desired. Lately, there have been many attempts at renaming ("chief people officer," "talent acquisition manager," and numerous other inventions) what HR people are called to better reflect the importance of people in the business equation and the role of HR professionals. HR is certainly not alone in the renaming activity. Almost all of the "C" level titles are a fairly modern invention.

At the time of the renaming of the function from "personnel administration" to "human resources" there was a general business affinity for the "resource management" designation: financial resources, manufacturing resources, information resources, and so on. It was also an era in which the value and importance of human relations in the workplace was recognized as a critical success factor, so "human resources" made sense. A large majority of human resources executives consider the recent idea to call the function "human capital management" grossly inappropriate. Again, it may seem unimportant, but the importance of not using such oppressive terms relates directly to whether a firm will be able to engage a workforce in a competitive way -- whether or not an employment brand will be created and maintained that will accomplish the goals of the organization including environmental draw..

It is not only the leaders and practitioners of a function or profession that have interest in the name they use. Vendors and customers of that function also have an interest. Vendors of products and services related to the hiring, retaining, developing, organizing, and managing of workers (e.g., employees, contractors, and temps) are constantly looking for product branding ideas that will make their products easier to sell to the corporation. Part of a good vendor strategy is to use a brand that will be acceptable to the HR, finance, materials (purchasing), and general management decision makers.

What You Call Them Is What They Will Be

Symbols are exceptionally important in creating and shaping perspective and what people believe about their employers, government, church, or colleagues. Corporations spend billions of dollars to foster positive relationships in their workplace. They hire experts in human relations and social systems. They create work environments that support and encourage employees. They spend 60–100% of their senior management’s time dealing with issues of the workforce. They spend billions of dollars buying products and services from vendors to help manage the workforce to better facilitate and support each worker’s ability to contribute to the enterprise and to derive the best personal benefit. Symbols are clearly recognized as a critical element in the success of an enterprise.

The criticality of the use of terms is clear. If a desire of the company is to engage and employ human beings in a way that will contribute the greatest value to the organization, those human beings must believe that the company values them as individuals. The use of designations such as “associate,” “team member,” or “administrative assistant” instead of “clerk,” “laborer,” or “secretary” is a good example of how naming symbolically conveys respect and regard for the individual worker.

Again, using the example of the human capital term, common sense suggests: “If you call workers capital, then expect them to act like capital.” That, of course requires them to constantly change jobs to maximize the return on their time. Many people do behave that way, and corporate America constantly bemoans the fact that it has such high turnover of employees. Encouraging employees to think of themselves as capital serves only to increase turnover. Encouraging them to think of themselves as stakeholders and community members rather than as “hired hands” helps build community which supports retention and group cohesion. That is an outcome of the use of positive symbols. A consistent positive image results in the kind of employment brand necessary to compete for the best workforce in the 21st century. Does your business require candidates interested in only their own profit (For some, the answer is yes.); or do you desire people who will become committed and loyal to your organization?

What You Call Them Is How You Will Treat Them

The symbolic power of naming also extends to how those in power treat employees. The difference in treatment is clearly observable, for example, in some companies in the garment industry, where piece-workers are often treated with contempt and disregard, or in the medical community, where doctors are given respect and status because of their titles alone regardless of their individual value or contribution. Over the past several decades the terms used to identify and describe people have become much more personal and meaningful. More often you hear “colleague” than “subordinate” or “leader” rather than “boss.” Workers of the 21st century are much more independent than their counterparts in 20th century, and they have numerous choices to remedy adverse treatment from their employer. If they don’t like what they

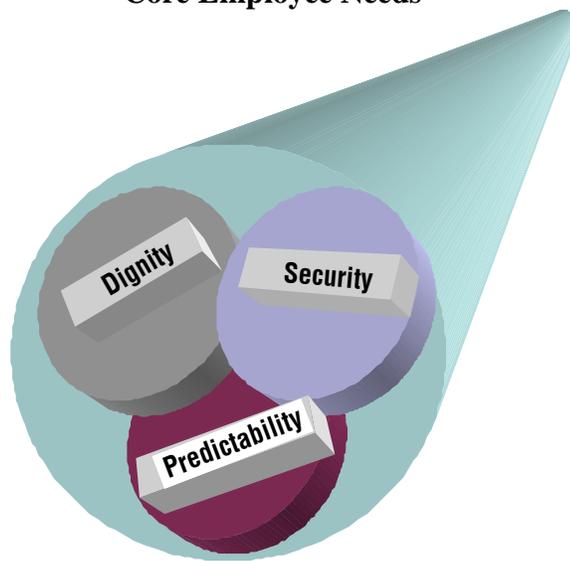
are called, they may sue or quit. One of the most often stated reasons for resignation or low morale is how employees are treated by supervisors or management.

If managers and supervisors believe that employees are expendable resources, assets, or capital, they will surely treat them that way. Modern evidence is the current practice of companies reducing the number of employees to increase profit or to send a symbolic signal to the stock market to encourage a higher stock share value even though the company can afford to maintain the employees. Employees understand and react negatively to this kind of anti-employee behavior and symbol. It is much easier to make adverse decisions regarding the employees when they are seen as assets or capital rather than when they are viewed as human beings with whom the enterprise has a relationship or as an integral part of the enterprise. It is this aspect of the relationship, that is the very basis of that sense of commitment and loyalty from employees that corporations desire. It is the core of the organization and an element that will be supportive of a positive employment brand.

How Do You Build Positive Relations and Employment Brand?

Well, it is clear that the use of negative symbols or names will not get the commitment or loyalty desired. It is also clear that employees who believe that their needs are being met by the company tend to be better employees — motivated, productive, committed, and loyal. The issue is often twofold: environment and individual. The individual core needs in the categories of security, predictability, and dignity are always at the forefront of consideration (see Figure 1). Attending to these needs will create the kind of employee every enterprise wants. Ignoring them will foster employee dissatisfaction, low morale, high turnover, poor quality, and business results.

Figure 1
Core Employee Needs



Source: Boyd Associates

The employee's environment is where much of the symbolism of names, terms, and behaviors is observed. Environment includes the physical, social, and emotional surroundings of which employees are a part. The elements of environment can be arranged and constructed to address many of the individual core needs of employees. For example, an excellent compensation and benefits program will address some employee security needs. Pleasant surroundings, comfortable furniture, modern office equipment, sufficient parking, and physical security will help with security and dignity. Stable employment, flexible work rules, and social cohesion will support predictability. It is important to note, however, that there is no normal or correct arrangement of which elements fit into which of those core employee need areas. Each individual will have an individual arrangement. For example: pay may be an issue of security for one person, dignity for another, and predictability for yet another. For some pay may impact in all of the areas.

It is easy to determine exactly what is important to the management of a company by simply walking through the company's facilities. You may observe symbolism both by the presence of materials and structure and by the lack of it. While personal work spaces adorned with individualized belongings (e.g., pictures, rugs, and collectibles) suggest people have an integrated personal and work life that includes the company, the lack of personalization indicates little integration. Bulletin boards full of pictures of social events, pictures of weddings and new babies, workgroup social plans and communications show strong group cohesion; the bulletin boards containing only management memos and company rules and regulations indicates that relationships are purely work centric. These observations are not lost on the individuals working at the company. They behave in accordance with the culture that is reflected by those observations. Those images and symbols will become the elements of the company and employment brand. Trying to construct a brand inconsistent with reality will simply not work. It will only add a coercive image to the real brand recognized in the market. Whether or not a company likes it, the brand attributed to the company by its own workers and in the labor market will reflect the real culture, not the espoused or desired one. Candidates will see the real environment, not a orchestrated false brand.

Managing Human Commitment

The best companies consistently demonstrate broad support of and participation in a work environment that causes and maintains the perception of individual human value and contribution. It is this perception that keeps employee retention rates high and the company's business position competitive. Those companies have the employee commitment and loyalty that they desire and have earned. In surveys of senior human resources professionals, 100% agree that they spend a measurable percentage of their time considering and managing symbols and their impact on the workplace. They have a positive employment brand.

One of the business dynamics learned from the retail world is that committed and loyal employees result in committed and loyal customers. Manufacturing industries

have realized that kind of employee ensures committed and loyal vendors, and the electronics industries have long known that the only way they can achieve product excellence is by garnering the commitment of their engineers. Retailers know that customer satisfaction and loyalty is directly tied to how employees feel and act.

As previously mentioned, the symbols of employer commitment and individual accommodation are two of the most important tools for a company. These symbols set the tone of the work environment and establish an emotional zone of reference for how the employee feels about the company. One need go no further than the symbols of religion or politics to observe how powerful the role of symbols is in influencing social groups and individuals.

Granted, it is often not an easy balance due to the conflicting nature of symbols. Most don't have a universal meaning. They are rarely neutral, and therefore they can easily cause an opposite reaction than that desired. Examples are found in the marketing and advertising journals of the world. All too frequently, a product advertisement creating the desired reaction from millions of people contains symbols highly offensive to millions of others, causing millions of dollars lost in good will, sales, and increased marketing costs. A poor employment brand can have the same effect on the ability to attract and retain human resources.

When this type of poor symbolism occurs in the workplace it results in increased employee turnover, employee lawsuits, and shareholder dissatisfaction. The key to workplace symbols is extreme care and caution in what symbols are selected and in how they are used. Having a Christmas tree in your lobby in December is a wonderful symbol of support of employee religious beliefs, but that symbol may not ring true if prayer rooms for Muslim midday prayers are refused. Many companies use employee activity committees to conceive and implement many of the symbols that make a difference in the workplace such as subsidized activities (e.g., golf leagues, basketball tournaments, shopping outings, social events, and in-house espresso carts).

Some managers post group accomplishments and progress toward goals to provide a symbol of a culture of achievement. Many firms have a practice of posting quality metrics as part of their total quality management (TQM) program which is meant to be a symbol of the company's commitment to quality. Many companies have an annual outing that is symbolic of a company sharing success and recognizing group contribution.

There is nothing as powerful, however, as actions that also deliver a strong symbol of caring to the workforce. Often these actions create symbols that become part of the mythology of the enterprise and part of the brand. The president of a small jet pulverization and air classification equipment design and manufacturing firm in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, ran into a burning factory building and dragged out a janitor who had become trapped. As a result, the president was surrounded with employees who were fully committed to his goals and directions until he retired. The president became a symbol of caring, commitment, and action.

Benefits of Positive Symbols

The overarching benefit of positive symbols in this discussion is simply that employees achieve a level of commitment equal to the strength of how they feel about the company. This also creates an employment brand. Symbols are major contributors to how employees feel. A committed employee is less likely to leave the company, give away company property or secrets, vandalize company property, discourage others from joining the firm, file a lawsuit, do poor work, and be a less-than-desirable employee. They will succeed, refer new hires, remain committed and loyal, and remain with the enterprise.

You can see and feel the positive energy in an environment populated by a committed workforce. You can see visible symbols and overhear those created through practices and activities in that environment.

A good management team knows how to create this kind of workplace and how to leverage it. Firms like the old Hewlett-Packard, the former Digital Equipment Corp., and Quantum Corp. became examples of excellent positive employee relations through the establishment of workplace philosophies and practices that were clearly favorable to employees' individual needs and accommodation. Business metrics such as attrition rates, cost per employee, quality, contribution per employee, and employee satisfaction were consistently best in class. The symbols evident in workplaces were positive and reflective of the positive employment brand and workforce commitment.

The symbols of the company's commitment to employees are very prominent and well managed in those types of workplaces. Additionally, the human resources departments spend a great deal of time reinforcing the positive environment and making sure that positive symbols are evident and negative ones removed.

This is not something that can be left to chance. A work environment left unmanaged will ultimately produce undesirable outcomes for the business. The workforce will be uncommitted and any employment brand will suffer. The existing employees won't like their association; and the possible future employees will quickly be dissuaded from joining.

Recommendations

- Do a careful assessment of what is important to the employees in your company and a complementary assessment of the behaviors and symbols within the workplace to which the employees are exposed.
- Eliminate counterproductive symbols and behaviors.
- Implement a system of supports and sanctions so that desirable behaviors predominate and employees recognize those behaviors as the acceptable ones in the company.
- Rigorously manage symbols in the workplace, creating new positive ones and continually assessing old ones. Too often the meanings of positive symbols change over time and become negative to the workforce that has changed over time.
- Institutionalize the management of symbols and symbolism so that it is not an ad hoc activity performed when a clerk in the HR department happens to think of it. Make it every manager's job and HR's responsibility.
- Focus on symbols that support employee commitment and loyalty. And, by the way, don't call them capital! They will resent it.
- Use these same positive symbols and images to construct a positive employment brand and keep it updated with new symbols and images. Consider the old UNISYS monitor-head brand example. It worked!
- And, finally, manage your employment brand aggressively so that it makes your company a desirable employer that results in environmental draw.

Dr. H. Michael Boyd is an internationally recognized expert in the field of human resources with over 40 years of corporate and consulting experience. Dr. Boyd is President of Boyd Associates, a HR Strategy consulting firm; Professor of Management and Human Resource Management at Bentley University; and active in the HR professional world. www.BoydAssociates.net