Changing HR's Image: We're More Than Terminators

I was inspired to write this post after attending a dinner party where the topic of my profession came up in get-to-know-you conversation. After some brief small-talk, here's how it went down.

Me: So, what do you do for a living?

Her: I work for the airlines?

Me: Oh, cool, that must be fun to travel all over the world, huh?

Her: Yes, I really enjoy it. What do you do?

Me: I work in human resources.

(Insert sound of figurative gun loading and the Great Wall of China going up between us).

Her: Oh, so you fire people.

So this is the point of the conversation where I had to hold back because this is around the thousandth time someone had said that. I calmly explained that while I ***am*** involved in terminations, it makes up a ***fraction*** of the work I do.

When I walked away from our conversation I spent the better part of the evening coming up with explanations as to how she got that perception of HR. Surely, she must have either been terminated by an HR professional or had a family, friend or coworker recant their horror story firing in which someone from HR was involved.

Those of us in HR know that terminations are a part of our job but not all of it. We aren't sitting in our office planning out how our day of endless terminations will go. I mean, c'mon, if you enjoy firing people you may have a few screws loose—either that or Simon Cowell is on your speed dial.

So how do we change HR's image to our employees?

Here's what others are saying.

Amanda McGrory-Dixon suggests in her article entitled How to get past the negative HR

reputation that HR can counter the negativity by “increasing their presence in positive situations rather than those that call for unfortunate outcomes. ” Sounds like an oversimplified approach but it definitely makes sense.

Here’s how to make that happen.

Walk around the office (and smile), make small talk, ask employees about their weekend plans or how their sick family member is doing. Let them see that HR is interacting with people and nothing negative is happening. Be involved in team-building activities and recognition ceremonies. The more you show that HR is there for positive things, the more comfortable they’ll feel when they need to go to you for something or you call them to your office.

Stephanie Hammerwold, in her post for @Blogging4Jobs entitled Creating a Good Reputation for HR says that we can get past a negative view of HR by being more accessible. If you’re the sole HR person for a company with multiple sites like a retail chain, make set days and times that you are available for questions or concerns. If you have to, bring a folding table and chair. Set up shop and let employees know that it is their time to have face time with HR. This way, you’re more approachable and they see you as a positive force within the company.

Stephanie also says that we can create a more positive image for HR by focusing on benefits and incentives. “When you are visiting with employees, ask about benefits. Find out what they want.” Maybe pet insurance or a discount for cell phones are really important to them. If you can show you are listening to them and implement some of their ideas you’ve just won yourself an internal cheerleader—someone who can help to sell your ideas to to their coworkers.

So why does all of this matter? I mean, does changing HR’s perception really help us and our companies? The answer is yes.

When you are able to portray HR as positive you’ll have a better shot at getting buy-in for initiatives from management and employees will feel more comfortable bringing concerns to you like experiencing harassment or issues with their manager.

Oh, and hopefully at your next dinner party when you meet someone and say you work in HR and they won’t picture you as the lead in a firing squad.