Byers' Market

by Boyd Byers

And the Survey Says . . .

A couple of recent surveys caught my attention. The results of the surveys not only provide a good chuckle but also offer lessons for HR professionals.

Strange employee complaints

So you think you've heard it all when it comes to employee complaints? A recent national survey asked managers to report the oddest complaint they received from an employee about a coworker. Here are some of the best (or are they the worst?) responses:

- employee is too suntanned;
- employee has "big hair";
- employee is so polite it's infuriating;
- employee's aura is wrong;
- employee's body is magnetic and keeps deactivating my magnetic access card;
- employee smells like road ramps;
- employee wears bells on her shoes, and it's not the holidays; and
- employee reminds me too much of Bambi.

The survey offers a glimpse into two unfortunate facets of humankind. First, people can be petty. And petty people do petty things. They pick on the people around them and turn molehills into mountains. You need to be vigilant to identify and properly deal with petty employees before they bring down morale or create a hostile work environment.

Second, people can be biased against one another for peculiar reasons. If an employee is troubled because she believes a coworker is too tan, has the wrong aura, or looks like Bambi, it's not a stretch to recognize that there are still people out there who harbor prejudices based on race, national origin, religion, disability, and other protected characteristics.

You need to ensure that employment decisions are made for legitimate business- related reasons. Courts are increasingly recognizing the "cat's paw" theory of discrimination, in which an adverse employment decision is made by a person who doesn't have an impermissible bias but was unwittingly influenced by someone with a discriminatory motive.

So when a manager wants to fire or discipline an employee, don't blindly take the manager's version of events as the final word. Talk to the employee to get his side of the story. Interview coworkers as necessary. Make sure policies and procedures are followed. Review the documentation and objective evidence to make sure things are in fact as the manager says they are. If his stated reason for wanting to take the action doesn't fully check out, throw on the brakes and ask him some pointed questions.

Annoying buzzwords

Another recent survey — this one taken by big-company executives — sought to identify the most annoying or overused workplace phrases and buzzwords. The responses included:

- think outside the box;
- empower;
- on the same page;
- value-added;
- customer-centric;
- circle back;
- win-win;
- cutting edge; and
- at the end of the day.

Do any of these sound familiar? HR is often perceived as too "touchy-feely" and full of gobbledygook already, so don't add to the misperception by using trite terms and expressions, particularly in written communications or formal presentations. Say what you mean, and mean what you say, skipping clichés and tired phrases. When business communications are peppered with annoying or overused workplace terms, employees are prone to tune out or even ridicule the intended message. (If you don't believe me, rent some old episodes of *The Office* or check out the book *The Dictionary of Corporate Bullshit: An A to Z Lexicon of Empty, Enraging, and Just Plain Stupid Office Talk,* by Lois Beckwith.)

He said it

USA Today has come out with a new survey — apparently, three out of every four people make up 75 percent of the population.

— David Letterman