

This is a companion piece to this blog post on upstartHR: [The New HR Department](#)

This article was written by a friend of mine, [Richard Sherman](#). He has given me advice and tips on working on a small HR team for quite some time and I was thrilled to ask him to be a contributor for this project.

Setting up an HR Department

By Richard Sherman

If you are setting up a brand-new HR department, or you are taking on one all on your own, build your plans for immediate impact projects, short-term (within the quarter) projects, and long-term projects. WRITE these plans down, and make yourself write milestones, dependencies, costs, and anything else you can think of. Revisit and revise these plans often. Live by them. Look very carefully at what you are doing that does not move these plans forward and see what you can give to someone else or at the very least, check to see whether you should even be doing it.

Your plans WILL be disrupted. Constantly. Build that into your timeline. Expect that there will be fire-drills (both figuratively and literally), that will take a significant amount of your time and attention away from what you planned to be doing. These disruptions will often take the form of employees who will inevitably start the conversation with "are you busy"? The answer to this is invariably "um, yes. always", but our challenge is that even if we have plans and projects and Things That Have Deadlines, when faced with an employee who needs help, our first role is to ensure that you listen to what they need and then to assess the urgency of handling that situation. It's about the humans. Don't lose sight of that.

Depending on your direct supervisor's style, talk about your plans and where you are with them regularly. Keep that person looped in to what you are facing, and what might be newly in the way to you getting stuff done. If that isn't their style, or they are not open to that, then find a mentor or another HR person you trust and share your process with them. If you are a soloist, you will need to have someone to share your woes and triumphs with who understands what you are facing.

Don't underestimate how much information your employees want. Most humans have a strong need for structure - this is not the same as rules. You don't need procedures for everything, and, for Pete's sake, you definitely don't need policies for everything, but people do want to know HOW things work and whenever possible, WHY they work that way. Hit the hot topics...talk to the managers and the employees...find out what they have questions about that bother them, or worse, what are the topics that they get different answers from different people about. Those are good places to start.

If you are a soloist, and especially if you are relatively new to employment laws, make yourself a binder (electronic or hard-copy) of the most up-to-date info on the basics (FMLA, FLSA, ADA,

and if you handle benefits, COBRA) - you will need to authoritatively answer questions on these often and it's best to have the info at your fingertips if you, like me, can't keep stuff in your head for very long.

Do your best to not become the "office cop" - the hardest role you have is to watch out for things that can get the company (and people) in trouble without being the person that everyone avoids because they want to do things that they know they shouldn't and don't want you finding out. Teach them to make those decisions for themselves and understand the risks all on their own. You are not there to correct behavior - you are there to guide and counsel employees at all levels to ensure that they make the best possible choices in their behavior. Both for their careers and growth and for the company.

Last of all, I want to share what I recently gave the managers in our office as "Richard's Top Three" - essentially, if nothing else, I would hope that managers can refer to these very basic things and try to do better at each of them every day. None of this is new. It's all been said before, but it may prove helpful to someone to have it right in front of them:

Richard's Top 3: Talk, Listen, and Write

Talk

Not a "drive-by" at their desk or in groups; one-on-one. Make the time. Don't just talk about goals and objectives. There is a time for that, but it should not be the only topic or every discussion. And some conversations should have nothing to do with them. Talk about what's going on. Share with them what the bigger pictures are; why we are doing what we are doing. Give them some perspective. Share with them what you are working on and facing in the coming months; don't vent at them, but tell them honestly about what is happening so they know how they fit in to that picture.

Listen

Make the time to really listen to your team members. Really. Put your notes down, look them in the eye, and listen to what they are saying and pay attention to how they are saying it. Watch their tone and their body language. Really listen to their words and their feelings. Learn about what drives them, what makes them anxious, what they are struggling with. Give them the opportunity to talk about non-work struggles or enjoyments if they choose to share them. Don't ever press them for personal information, but if they want to talk about their life outside of work, listen to them. It will help you understand their motivations and fears, as well as what may be impacting them and affecting their work.

Write

Use email as a tool to clarify and confirm. Use it less than you are now. This is very difficult in our current world and environment. Fight against the impulse to *start* a conversation via email. Talk to the person first. Then use email to follow-up and clearly, concisely ensure that both of you are in agreement about what took place and the next steps forward. Do not start a performance discussion via email; it's a documentation tool for following-up and clarifying, and

should not be the first place an employee hears about your concerns. Be careful of the “tone” of your emails; never write them when you are angry or frustrated. Step away from it, and, if necessary, have someone else read what you are planning on sending before you send it. Your writing is a reflection of you; take the time to use proper punctuation and grammar. Don’t sacrifice etiquette and professionalism for anything.