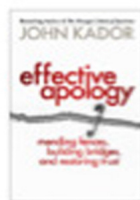


Apology Is the First Resort

Why is it so hard for HR professionals to be accountable for mistakes and faulty judgments? All professionals are reluctant to admit they are less than perfect. And everyone is apprehensive about the consequences of making mistakes. But there is evidence that HR professionals may be a little more adverse to admitting mistakes than other professionals.

By John Kador

Human resource professionals make no more mistakes than their peers in information services, accounting, finance or any other department. But when HR makes a mistake, the consequences are usually obvious and messy for the organization. So what are HR executives to do when they realize they have made a mistake or given faulty advice?



Plan A is to admit the mistakes as soon as possible, sometimes before they have become obvious, accept full responsibility, apologize and accept the consequences. Plan B is to wait to see if things really are as bad as feared, shift the blame, minimize, cover-up, spin and deny. There's little middle ground.

Let's look at some actual examples of HR mistakes. No one likes to admit mistakes. So I have agreed to change names and identifying details as a condition of reporting these stories of actual HR foul-ups. As you read these stories, put yourself in place of the HR executive and try to decide how you would handle it.

HR Gives Faulty Information

The first example takes place at a global technology company. A well-respected computer analyst – let's call him Jim – with 10 years at the company announces his resignation because he has an opportunity to join a start-up. Everyone is sad to see him go and wishes him well.

A month later, Jim asks for his job back. The start-up did not work out. Jim's manager is glad to have him back. The company's policy allows rehiring of former employees. Jim left on good terms and returns on good terms.

So far so good. But here's where the problem starts. When Jim reapplied for his job, he asked HR whether his seniority would be reset. In other words, would he be treated as a brand-new employee or would his seniority be preserved? The HR manager assured Jim, "It's like you never left. Your seniority continues, minus the one month you were away."

A year passes and Jim receives his year-end bonus. He's unhappy because the bonus is much lower than he expected; in fact it's calculated not on 11 year's credit, but on just one year.

So Jim appeals and it's revealed that the HR manager who assured Jim that he would not lose seniority was, in fact, wrong.

And then, the HR manager denies saying anything of the sort, so Jim feels doubly betrayed. Betrayed, first, by the HR manager, whom he thought should have been more of an advocate, and betrayed also by the company's bonus program. Instead of being motivated by the bonus, Jim was left feeling frustrated and demotivated.

The situation ended especially badly. Jim produced an e-mail that demonstrated that the HR manager did indeed give faulty advice. The HR manager was asked to resign and Jim left the company shortly thereafter.

It's not hard to understand what probably happened. The HR manager panicked. Caught in a significant mistake, her first instinct was to deny and to protect herself. Worse, she engaged in a cover-up. Such lack of integrity ended her career.

It didn't have to be that way.

Had the HR manager accepted accountability for her mistake and apologized to Jim and the CFO, the situation would have been manageable. Assuming that such mistakes weren't a pattern, the HR manager could have saved her job. A compromise could have been worked out with Jim, a valued employee, and the company would have an opportunity to reaffirm its seniority policy or change it. The lack of accountability and apology subverted all that.

Termination Letter Mailed to Wrong Employee

Not all HR mistakes end as badly. Here's an example of a mistake that's probably the basis for the nightmares of many HR executives. I'm indebted to Washington-based HR consultant Katharine Giacalone for this example.

A large company with thousands of employees scheduled a mass layoff. The HR department mailed termination letters to the homes of about 100 employees. Unfortunately, a valued employee not on the layoff list received the letter by mistake.

When the HR executive discovered the error, she had a decision to make.

She could attempt to handle the situation herself and perhaps avoid criticism of her department, but she understood that this was a significant mistake with significant downsides for the company.

She immediately went to the president of the company and explained the situation. She accepted responsibility and apologized for the error. The HR executive further recommended that the president phone the employee, apologize for the mistake, rescind the letter and ask the employee to return to the job that was waiting for her.

The president followed the HR executive's recommendation. Initially, the employee was justifiably angry. She had started making plans for a new job and didn't know if she wanted to come back. The president was very apologetic and assured the employee that she was valued and there was no intent to terminate her.

This situation worked out well. The employee accepted the president's apology and returned to her job. The relationship between the president and HR executive actually improved. The incident renewed the president's trust in HR, recognizing that, even when things go wrong, HR has the best interests of the company in mind and will not blindside the president.

And because the HR department was willing to be accountable, the energy that might have gone into covering up the incident was instead channeled into ensuring that wrongful termination letters would not be sent out in the future.

The moral here, according to Giacalone, is that the HR executive balanced her advocacy for employees with her commitment to the business.

"She was willing to be accountable for the actions of her department without blaming anyone else," Giacalone says. "The HR executive understood that the best outcome required the president's involvement and it was much better that the president hear of the problem from her instead of someone else."

Apology Outcomes

Why is it so hard for HR professionals to be accountable for mistakes and faulty judgments? All professionals are reluctant to admit they are less than perfect. And everyone is apprehensive about the consequences of making mistakes. But there is evidence that HR professionals may be a little more averse to admitting mistakes than other professionals.

Two reasons may account for the relative difficulty of HR professionals to hold themselves accountable.

First, there is a certain defensiveness that still prevails among some HR departments. Many organizations have residues of the stereotype that HR managers are less professional than other managers.

"To the extent that HR internalizes that stereotype, it is not surprising that there might be a temptation to cover up mistakes, lest they give credence to the stereotype," says Ethan Becker, president of Boston-based Speech Improvement Co., who frequent consults on communications issues with HR executives.

Lawrence Polsky, managing partner of People Energy, a consulting firm in Princeton, N.J., agrees.

"At the end of the day, disclosing their own mistakes is tricky for all executives, but HR executives may have an especially hard time because of their training," he says. "As part of their professional duties, HR executives are put in the middle and frequently expected to withhold the facts and delay the disclosure of information."

In fact, HR managers have to train themselves to resist disclosing truthful information. Given that the culture of HR is sometimes antagonistic to transparency; it may be difficult for HR managers to satisfy the organization's needs for transparency when it's about the limitations of HR itself that transparency is called for.

Acts of Omission

HR managers can also err by failing to do the right thing. Lauren Bloom, a lawyer practicing in the Washington area, and the author of *The Art of Apology*, recalls a recent incident in which a company president wanted to classify his overworked secretary as exempt -- when, by the company's own definitions, she wasn't.

Nevertheless, the president ordered the HR manager to arrange the reclassification. The president said he would be responsible for the action, and the HR manager capitulated.

The situation went on for a number of years. Then, as these things do, the situation unraveled. The secretary, fed up with the endless, uncompensated overwork, resigned and demanded all the back wages – at time-and-a-half – that she has accumulated over the years. She claimed tens of thousands of dollars for unpaid overtime.

In the investigation, the HR manager accepted full responsibility for her failure. She pointedly did not excuse her judgment on the rationalization that she was just following orders. She apologized for not standing up, for failing to document her professional judgment and for allowing herself to be pressured.

Because the HR manager accepted full responsibility, she kept her job.

Evidence shows that executives who apologize just have better outcomes. ([Read The Five Rs of Effective Apology](#) .) Everyone in HR knows that that the cover-up is always worse than the underlying offense; yet when HR executives make a mistake, many are tempted to see how the situation plays out, see who else can be blamed or attempt to minimize their responsibility.

Such instincts are normal, but they must be resisted. Instead, HR leaders must instill a culture of strict accountability, starting with themselves.