12 Human Resource Best Practices to Improve Your Operations

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#1 – HR Liability Issues – For Lawyers It’s Like Shooting Fish in a Barrel

Of all the potential minefields that managers and supervisors must walk through, the requirements of human resource management are by far the most fraught with peril. Based on federal and state law, they are the fantasy dreams of many lawyers hungering to "redress wrongs."

And unfortunately, many employers make it easy for the lawyers – like shooting fish in a barrel – when they don’t train their management staff on the pitfalls of labor laws, equal opportunity employment, discrimination, fair pay, disability issues, family medical leaves, privacy laws, and the basic requirements to document personnel actions.

Private clubs are especially vulnerable due to their small size, lack of resources, and limited economies of scale. Yet even stand-alone operations can protect themselves by a process of self-education and review. *HR on the Go* is a series of 52 human resource topics that can be reviewed and discussed briefly at weekly department head meetings. Designed to take no more than 5 to 10 minutes, these issues can be raised and discussed by the general manager, HR manager, or assigned to different department heads each week.

Experience has shown that the awareness of issues raised by such discussions will greatly reduce a club’s liability exposure, as well as enhance the professional awareness of all managers.

Check out *HR on the Go* on the PCPM Marketplace store.

#2 – Six Steps to Lower Employee Turnover

Study after study has demonstrated the high cost of employee turnover, particularly in the club industry where the work is so detail-intensive, requiring significant training to meet standards.

Recognizing that the desired outcome of every hiring decision is to find and onboard a qualified and enthusiastic person who will make a positive contribution to the success of the club, it is essential for all managers to make efforts to lower employee turnover rates. Here are six steps to help you do just that:

1. **Hire Well**. Use the techniques of Disciplined Hiring to screen applicants and check references. When possible, use personality profiles to ensure you put the right person in “the right seat on the bus.” See *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Five Human Resource Best Practices for Private Clubs* for more information.

2. **Onboard Well**. Use all the club’s tools to both welcome and orient new hires to the workplace. The *Employee Handbook*, club orientation, and departmental orientations are designed to provide and reinforce important information to the new hire. Managers must make sure that orientations are welcoming and make all necessary introductions to both supervisors and peers.
3. **Train Well.** Both initial and ongoing training is essential. Most people want to do a good job and appreciate the efforts made to train them. Without adequate training and the necessary tools and resources to do their jobs well, new hires will quickly become cynical and alienated. Never forget that their success guarantees your success (see *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Comprehensive Club Training – Executing on Your Promise of Quality and Service*).

4. **Organize Well.** No one wants to work in a chaotic environment. If your department or section is well-organized, if everyone knows where things are, if employees are well-trained in opening and closing procedures, if everyone knows their responsibilities and is held accountable, the workplace runs almost effortlessly. Don’t run off good people by putting them through the hell of a disorganized operation (see *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Quality and Service in Private Clubs – What Every Manager Needs to Know* for details).

5. **Communicate Well.** Daily engagement and direction ensure that everyone is informed, knows what is going on, and what they must do individually to accomplish the tasks at hand. It is also instrumental in building teamwork and a sense of shared values and mission. The Daily Huddle, or some other form of pre-shift meeting, is a key discipline to ensure ongoing, consistent communication.

6. **Value Them Well.** Remember the ultimate value of people in all you do. Value your employees and they will value you as a leader and their efforts at work (see *PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Service Based Leadership - Knowing and Serving Your Constituencies*).

The bottom line is that your leadership is the essential element in your success. If you have high levels of turnover, there is no one to blame but yourself.

**#3 – Improve Supervision with Managers’ Handbook**

Most clubs recognize the value of providing an employee handbook to all new employees. This is done with the understanding that there is much for new employees to learn about their workplace, its work rules, policies, and benefits. And while every new supervisory employee will usually receive an employee handbook as well, there is so much more for the manager or supervisor to know given the scope of her duties and the importance of executing them properly.

The common-sense solution is to prepare a managers’ handbook for all supervisory employees. In addition to those things found in the employee handbook, the managers’ handbook should discuss and reinforce such important topics as club values, service-based leadership, laws governing the workplace, employment and work policies of the club, employee development, conduct and disciplinary guidelines, accounting requirements, as well as safety and security. The basic idea is to give managers and supervisors all the information they need to operate the club professionally and consistently.

A sample *Managers’ Handbook* can be found on the PCPM Marketplace store.
#4 – Prohibited Interview Questions

If you are considering hiring a new employee, be sure you and your management team know what you can and cannot ask during a job interview.

What questions should not be asked during an interview stem from a variety of federal, state, and local laws which prohibit employment discrimination based on protected groups. Below are some general topics you must avoid asking a job applicant during an interview. Also included are some specific questions that you can ask during the hiring process. If in doubt, however, a good rule of thumb is “If it’s not job-related, don’t ask.”

Direct questions of a job applicant on the following topics are prohibited:

- **Age** – including questions that may reveal age, such as the year of high school or college graduation.
- **Religion** – you can and should, however, explicitly state the working hours of the position, particularly if it includes weekend work, and ask whether the applicant can work those hours with reasonable accommodation.
- **Race**
- **Gender**
- **National Origin/Citizenship** – you may ask if the applicant is eligible to work legally in the United States.
- **Disabilities/Health History** – you can enquire about the applicant’s ability to perform the essential functions of the job as described in the job description.
- **Union Membership**
- **Languages Proficiency** – unless a specific language skill is required for the job.
- **Marital/Family Status** – including questions about maiden name, pregnancy, children, and childcare. You can, however, ask any former employer if the applicant was ever known by another name. You can also ask job-related questions about hours/shifts applicants would and would not be available to work, as well as any other responsibilities that might interfere with specific job provisions, such as traveling.
- **Workers’ Compensation/History of Sick Days**
- **Prior Arrests** – being arrested is different from being convicted.
- **Current Military Service and Type of Discharge from any Previous Service** – you can ask if an applicant was formerly in the military, but enquiries should be limited to length of service, final rank upon discharge, and the type of applicable work experience gained in the military.
- **Sexual Orientation**
- **Past Bankruptcies or Garnishment of Wages** – employers may still use credit reports in their hiring process, but they must ensure that they comply with the Fair Credit Reporting Act, as well as any applicable state privacy laws.
- **Frequency of and/or Treatment of Illegal Drug/Alcohol Abuse** – some very limited questions about illegal drug use are technically permitted. Specific questions such as, “Do you currently use illegal drugs,” “Have you ever used illegal drugs?” and “What types of illegal drugs have you used in the last 6 months?” can be asked, but to be safe, these are better left to the HR experts.

- **Clubs/Organization Memberships** – you can, however, ask “What professional or trade groups do you belong to that you consider relevant to performing this job?”

- **Home/Car Ownership** – you can ask if the applicant has a reliable method of getting to work each day.

### #5 – New Hire Orientations – Getting Them Off on the Right Foot

Managers go to a lot of trouble to find new employees – but not just any employee. By using the principles and techniques of Disciplined Hiring, they make the effort to not only get the right people on the bus, but to get the right people in the right seats on the bus. In making this effort, they should have only one goal in mind and that is to find and hire people who will make a positive and continuing contribution to the success of the organization.

Keeping in mind that first impressions are powerful determinants in establishing a person’s attitudes about, and commitment to, a new job, it is imperative that clubs welcome and impress the new hire. But the consequences of not providing a warm, welcoming, and informative onboarding process go far beyond first impressions.

Understand that your club’s reputation as an employer in the local labor market is directly related to the work experiences of your employees. When they are not properly onboarded and trained, when they are not given the necessary tools and resources to do their jobs, when they are not properly led, when their leaders do not set a professional example, you can be assured that your operation will have high levels of turnover and people in the surrounding community will know just what kind of employer you are. With this kind of reputation, you will have a hard time attracting dedicated and competent employees – the ones that every employer wants to hire – and you condemn yourself to unending personnel problems, lack of employee commitment, and famously poor service.

On the other hand, when you treat your employees with dignity and respect, when you recognize that willing, committed, and empowered employees make all the difference in service to your members, you know that how employees are treated from day one will go a long way toward demonstrating the club’s commitment to its staff, thereby ensuring their commitment to the club.

So, the first step in the process of gaining the commitment of employees is a well-thought out and consistently executed onboarding plan for new hires. This initial orientation to the organization is usually given by the HR manager or a person acting in that capacity. Here are some of the basic things to include:

- **An Introduction to Organizational Values and Culture of Service.** Organizational values are the foundation for how you conduct your business and interact with your members. Every employee must be well-versed in these values, and they must be
constantly reinforced throughout every employee’s tenure (see PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Organizational Values and Culture of Service).

- **Etiquette and Service Training.** A brief introduction will set the foundation for these important topics, though they must be taught and reinforced at regular intervals during employment (see PCPM, Insights and Ideas, Comprehensive Club Training – Executing on Your Promise of Quality and Service).

- **Review of Uniforms, Dress Code, and Grooming Standards.** Employees in a professional service organization must understand and consistently abide by these requirements.

- **Performance Expectations and Reviews.** Employees must understand basic expectations for their performance, conduct, and demeanor, and it is only fair to let them know when and how they will be reviewed.

- **Work Week, Pay Cycle, Timekeeping, and Overtime.** Employees need to understand these basic matters relating to their compensation. Spelling them out in detail consistently for all employees will answer a lot of their questions. They also need to know who to see if they have questions or problems relating to their hours and compensation.

- **Employment Status, Benefit Eligibility, and Benefits Enrollment.** Benefits are usually determined based upon an employee’s employment status (Full Time, Part Time, and Seasonal). Each employee must know his or her status, what benefits they might be eligible for, and when and how they can enroll for benefits.

- **Receipt of Employee Handbook.** Every employee must be given an employee handbook that provides all the information they need to know about employment with your club. For consistency, such information must be fully integrated with the Personnel Standards, Policies, and Procedures. It’s also a good idea to have them sign a receipt for the handbook that includes an acknowledgement statement that the material in the handbook is important and must be read and understood. The handbook receipt should be filed in the employee’s personnel file as proof that they received the handbook and were apprised of its importance.

- **Employee Work Rules.** Every club has its own work rules covering all sorts of topics from where to park, use of personal cells phones on the premises, calling off, work schedules, availability of lockers, entrances to use, employee meal policy, etc. These rules are usually included in detail in an employee handbook, but it’s a good idea to go over them in a face-to-face meeting, giving new hires ample opportunity to ask questions and seek clarification.

- **Safety, Accidents, and Emergencies.** It’s important to give employees a basic overview of safety policies, what to do in case of an accident or emergency, and the operation’s emergency and evacuation plans. While these should be covered in more formal safety training in each department, having a basic understanding from the beginning of employment is helpful.
In the first orientation, the new hires should meet and hear from the general manager at the beginning of their employment. This is a great opportunity to hear about the organization’s mission and vision from the chief executive or operating officer.

They should also be given a tour of the property and be introduced to each department head. Department heads can welcome the new hires and give a brief overview of the department’s function.

At the conclusion of the orientation, the new hires should be directed or taken to their departmental manager and the HR manager should document the orientation in each new hire’s personnel file by using a Club Orientation Checklist, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 105. I also would strongly recommend that each department head conduct a similar departmental orientation covering essential information specific to that department. Some of the same information should be reviewed in this second orientation to reinforce the message and ensure comprehension. As with the enterprise Orientation, department heads should complete and forward a Departmental Orientation Checklist, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 106, to the HR office for inclusion in the new hire’s file.

While the above requires time and effort, the results of a well-planned and executed onboarding scheme and the appropriate club and departmental orientations will start the new hire off on the right foot and make a strong first impression on new hires.

#6 – Communicating Expectations

Conscientious managers make a point of reviewing job descriptions with new hires to ensure they understand their duties and responsibilities. This review is a natural and expected part of the onboarding process and is an excellent starting point for orienting and training new employees.

There is, however, a second and no less important step that is done far less often – going over performance expectations with new hires. This is easily enough done with a minimum of time investment by sharing your club’s performance review form at the same time you review the job description. This way new hires gain an understanding, not only of what they must do, but how they must do it.

The bottom line is that everyone deserves to know by what criteria their work and efforts will be evaluated. Examining the review form in advance ensures that understanding and eliminates “surprises” when it’s time for formal reviews.

#7 – Supervisor’s Staff Notes

One of the most important things a supervisor can do to ensure meaningful employee development is to keep daily or weekly notes on the attitude, performance, and conduct of all members of his department or section. Staff Notes serve as a detailed and factual basis for informal discussions of an employee’s performance and progress, for detailing specifics during performance reviews, and as backup and support for counseling and/or disciplinary actions.

All supervisors should keep a small notebook for this purpose. The few minutes a day that it takes to record events, errors of omission and commission, attitude problems, superlative performance of duties, and conversations with or instructions to individual employees will pay...
immense dividends in the development of your team. Such records allow you to identify and recognize outstanding employees, to discharge the problem employee without difficulty, and to develop each person to his fullest potential through meaningful feedback.

Ensure that all entries in Staff Notes are professional, objective, and dispassionate. This is not the place to vent frustration or anger. Realize that your notes may be reviewed by others in a civil suit or labor hearing, so don’t put anything in it that may prove embarrassing later.

#8 – Document Counseling/Disciplinary Sessions

No one wants to have a wrongful termination suit brought against them. These most often come about when an employee thinks he or she is wrongfully discharged, and the employer does not have proper documentation of the events leading to the discharge.

Make documentation a routine and simple task for your managers and supervisors by using a pre-printed Record of Employee Counseling. This form prompts a supervisor to fill in all the required and pertinent information and has check off blocks for key statements the supervisor should make, and the employee acknowledge.

By properly filling out a Record of Employee Counseling for employee misconduct, giving the employee a copy, and filing a copy in the employee’s personnel file, the supervisor ensures a proper paper trail which will justify any disciplinary action or discharge.

Find the Record of Employee Counseling, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 103, on the PCPM Marketplace store.

#9 – Using a Separation Document

Employees terminate from the club for one of six reasons. They:

1. voluntarily quit, with or without notice,
2. abandon their position,
3. retire,
4. are laid off for insufficient work,
5. are discharged for poor work performance, or
6. are discharged for misconduct.

It is important that the employer have a clear, written record for every termination because it has a direct bearing on unwarranted unemployment claims (a terminated employee is only eligible for unemployment compensation if they were terminated involuntarily through no fault of their own – as in #4 above) and in defense against a wrongful termination suit (often brought on the grounds of discrimination or bias, sexual harassment, or violation of state or federal laws). The clearest and surest way to do this is to properly fill out and maintain in your files a separation document for every termination.

The form records the details of the termination, giving all the pertinent and specific facts. When this is done routinely for all terminations, it becomes far more difficult for specious claims against the club, as well as providing useful information should the former employee apply for
work with you at some point in the future. Clearly it would be in your interest to know if an applicant was discharged five years earlier for stealing.

Find the Employee Separation Document, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 117, on the PCPM Marketplace store.

#10 – Be Careful Who You Declare to be Exempt from Overtime

Throughout my career I’ve been surprised by the number of managers who think that they can reduce or eliminate overtime pay by paying someone on a salaried basis. Let me be perfectly clear – paying someone a salary instead of hourly has nothing to do with whether an employee is entitled to receive overtime pay for all time worked over 40 hours in a workweek.

The Fair Labor Standards Act specifies that certain requirements must be met for a position to be considered exempt from the overtime provisions of the Act. What makes a position exempt from overtime are certain narrowly defined requirements – relating to supervision, the amount of time spent supervising, and the authority to hire and fire or to recommend hiring and firing.

Be familiar with all wage and hour requirements to avoid the embarrassment of formal complaints, lawsuits, and the possible payment of back wages and penalties.

#11 – Workplace Relationships

Personal relationships between a supervisor and an employee reporting to, or whose work is directed by, that supervisor, are inappropriate for the same reasons that clubs do not permit nepotism, i.e., this situation can create the perception of unfairness in the minds of other employees and must be avoided.

While employees who do not fall within a supervisor/subordinate organizational structure are free to enter a personal or intimate relationship with other employees, the club should ensure that such employees are aware of the potential problems and sexual harassment issues related to workplace relationships.

Should the club become aware of a personal relationship between employees not involving direct supervision, it should ask the parties involved to sign a Personal Relationship Acknowledgement, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 107, explaining the potential problems and sexual harassment issues.

Such employees must also have the maturity to understand that overt or public displays of affection are unprofessional and can be distracting and disturbing to other employees and to members and guests.

#12 – Lowering Your Unemployment Compensation Rate

The percentage amount of tax your club pays into the state unemployment compensation fund is directly dependent on your unemployment compensation history. The more employees you lay off or terminate through no fault of their own, the higher the tax rate you pay.

Even employees who voluntarily quit can file for unemployment. If they claim abuse, retaliation, or any other excuse that forced them to voluntarily quit, they may still get a hearing. If your club doesn’t attend the hearing or cannot refute the former employee’s allegations with written
documentation, he or she may be awarded unemployment compensation, thereby impacting your tax rate.

The best way to avoid unwarranted unemployment claims against your club is to:

- properly and consistently document all misconduct and poor performance,
- ensure that performance reviews and performance discharges are consistent in documenting and informing the employee of the performance issues,
- routinely document all terminations with an Employee Separation Document, PCPM, Operational Resources, Club Form – Form 117, and
- attend all unwarranted unemployment claim hearings to refute employee allegations.

While all clubs pay state unemployment taxes based on the amount of their payroll, the tax rate assessed reflects the club’s diligence in documenting terminations and refuting unwarranted claims.
About the Author

Ed Rehkopf is a graduate of the U.S. Military Academy and received a Master of Professional Studies degree in Hospitality Management from Cornell’s School of Hotel Administration. During his long and varied career, he has managed two historic hotels, managed at a four-star desert resort, directed operations for a regional hotel chain, opened two golf and country clubs, worked in golf course development, and launched a portal web site for the club industry.