

# Appreciate people before they sue

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Anyone in management is aware of the recent spate of lawsuits regarding unpaid overtime. Some have attributed this to overzealous lawyers who are taking advantage of traditional employment practices that lag behind the fast-changing social landscape. Others are extrapolating the impact and worriedly looking at cell phone use, predicting that managers who call their employees while they are driving could be at risk if an accident occurs.

Underneath all the hyperbole and speculation, the heart of the issue is this: All work needs to be acknowledged, recognized and valued. Of course, leaders are expected to set reasonable work demands, and to ensure each person is fairly rewarded for what they do. Excuses and rationalizations about business pressures do not fool anyone. The idea of extra work indiscriminately added on, and then treated as voluntary and left unpaid, is offensive to everyone. Here are some ways not to offend.

1. Assess workloads regularly. It's amazing how quickly the workload can increase in many jobs. A sudden spike in demand for services isn't always predictable, nor is a decrease in resources. Even if you typically stay out of the details of what your team does, be close enough to recognize the warning signs of overload. Are reliable people missing deadlines? Did something important get missed? Don't assume that working harder is the result of personal ambition. Many people feel trapped by their work and unable to walk away from customers in need.

2. Have contingency plans. A leader's job is to ensure that resources meet current needs. When there is an imbalance, it's not ok to just let a high performing team pick up more work. Your job is to clearly identify what can be dropped, delayed or reassigned. Keep a list of contract resources that you can turn to in a crisis or for short term support. Decide what hands-on support you personally can offer. Anyone who has had to manage through a union strike knows how important it is to have contingency plans. Even if you are not unionized, you need a plan.

3. Have courage. It can be difficult to tell a senior leader or a valued client that you cannot meet expectations. Certainly, you don't want to wiggle out of commitments all the time. But if you have strong relationships in place, your credibility and conviction will support you. Everyone understands that unforeseen things happen. We've all been on the receiving end of mandated legislative change. Your team needs a leader who has the courage to say, "We can't deliver on this with our current resources." Or "I'm sorry, that will have to wait."

4. Have fair reward systems. Your staff are also counting on you to ensure they are fairly rewarded for all time and energy given to the job. Many Human Resources teams do a good job of checking for marketplace equity and pay fairness - doing annual salary surveys for example. However, falling short of the local job scene can quickly increase the risk of losing specialized skills and abilities from your team. It's up to you to tell HR when compensation and benefit systems are no longer motivating and retaining talented people. Don't make it up to each individual team member to beg for what they deserve. Some will just pick up and go where they will be appreciated. The same goes for jobs that grow - in responsibility and volume. Ensure they are re-evaluated and fairly paid.

5. Pay attention to the wider context. Pay attention to how other areas of your company and industry are operating. A casual conversation with a peer in another location can reveal a project or initiative that is in the works. This knowledge gives you a chance to calculate the ripple impact on your own team's workload. Many unpleasant workload surprises were merely communication oversights caused by workplace silos. If you are the leader, it's your job to hold the larger context and plan for the future. Your ability to manage work load extends far beyond the boundaries of your functional area, and even beyond the foreseeable future.

6. Simply show appreciation. Tell staff how much you value them, and use actions not just words. Provide the tools to do the job, reasonable work expectations, support in balancing work with personal commitments and rewards that fairly match the contributions made. And kind words - if you mean them. Finally, remember that "All talk no action" won't work. Sincere praise and kind words are nice, but they don't pay the bills.

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