

This Is the Group of Champions—  
Human Resources or  
Human Empowerment

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Human Empowerment can champion the Culture  
to be the Shining Star.

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## Human Resources—HR—rocks (so stop throwing stones at them)

I don't know about you, but I love HR. The department does so much for the company and its employees, and a lot of it, I feel, goes unrecognized. I don't know how those staff members keep all the plates spinning as they constantly help folks to be their best.

HR personnel secure benefit packages for us and our families and handle our 401Ks and retirement plans. They help guarantee that we'll be safe and taken care of. Many times they oversee training, employee development, and work activities and not only during business hours.

As far as I'm concerned, they should be the most revered employees of the company.

When I directed my clinics from 1982 to 2004, I took care of all kinds of people, but at least half of our patients worked, in some capacity, in a technology company in the Silicon Valley. I would always study patient demographics—where they came from, age, profession, and so on.

*HE—  
Human  
Empowerment*

After a couple of years, I had a fair amount of data about the percentages of patients in various occupations. The stats didn't change much over the years. But the demographics that didn't seem to make sense to me were the number of teachers and HR employees.

My clinic saw some patients with trauma from accidents, but for the most part, they came in for stress-related conditions—mental, postural, or repetitive in nature. The stress often manifested itself in migraines and other headaches, as well as neck, low back, and shoulder problems. Those teachers and HR folks were some of the nicest people I have ever met,

and I'd never thought of their professions as stressful, but something was certainly taking a toll!

Why were they so stressed out that they had physical symptoms? Was it because high demands were placed upon them? Were they overworked and underpaid? Teachers, I could figure out. I have kids, and I go bonkers once in a while. I can't imagine dealing with 30 of them together all day long. With the responsibility and challenge of inspiring and motivating students all with different levels of needs, it's understandable that their work can be stressful. (Teachers, I love you—and a big thank-you for all that you do!)

So that left the HR employees, and I started asking them about their job. In a nutshell, this is what they told me: the majority of their day was spent hearing "he said/she said" disagreements that had escalated out of control. They were undergoing a lot of tension and stress.

How can that be? These men and women were working with adults, helping them out, and they ended up being referees in he said/she said arguments?

My HR patients also said they had an undeserved bad rap.

I don't doubt that. Consider this scenario: a coworker or your manager tells you to go to HR. What would your reaction be? You'd probably be sure your job was about to end. The initials "HR" evoke certain unpleasant responses from everyone who hears them. It's like being told in grammar school, "You need to go to the Principal's office."

Why does everyone panic when faced with going to HR? By definition, that office should be seen as a place to get support or aid. Human Resources: Human—consisting of people; Resources—a source of supply, support, or aid. An employee who is asked to go to HR should not be scared out of his or her wits.

The use of HR as a department sprang up in the 1960s. Originally termed "human resource development," it was designed to *maximize* human potential. Yet today, even though most people within HR work very hard at the original idea, they still get an undeserved bad rap.

**What is your HR department doing to change its negative connotation?**

It's tough for HR to shed its connotations, though aligning itself with the goals of supplying support and maximizing human potential would be a good place to expand. So how can you change the way your employees view HR?

Since the very name HR gets in the way of accurate perceptions, why not begin by changing the name? Even though it may sound silly, a name change can do a great deal for people and companies alike.

To me, HR should be viewed more like what it is and can be: a combination of a loving, caring, empowering department that helps take employees to the Next Level, and a concierge. Changing the title to *Human Empowerment*—HE—gives the department a fresh start.

The new name will help employees focus their thoughts, decisions, and actions on empowerment, just as having a clear Vision and Purpose aligns the company and moves everyone in the same direction.

Much of what the HR department does for employees lies behind the scenes and goes unrecognized or unacknowledged. That's the reason why at Zappos we started to have the different people from HR sit in with other teams and departments. This created close relationships and increased communication companywide. Getting them front and center did wonders for everyone, especially the HR department!



# The new Human Empowerment Department—HE

What if your new HE department was always asking employees if they needed anything or if there was anything they could do to help? That would be taking a proactive stance toward building relationships.

**HE can have the biggest impact on the empowerment of the employees when it acts proactively.**

**Allow your HE department to empower your human assets and your Culture.**

**HE can be the single biggest champion of your company's Culture. After all, they are the ones who have the relationships with and trust of the employees.**

The HE Department can really help out with the Culture and brand, because if the company's Culture is shining on the inside, the brand that people outside see will shine as well.

## COACHING IS A GREAT WAY TO DEFUSE ANY CHALLENGES

At Zappos, the coaching program usually was able to handle all challenges before they escalated, which turned out to be fantastic, although it wasn't planned that way. As the Coach, I would have office hours, and at least 20 employees a day stopped by to have a chat.

They knew that the Coach's office was a safe spot where they wouldn't

be judged. Employees could sit on the Throne and feel like royalty. My office was a neutral zone like Switzerland. Nothing would be divulged unless the employee was going to hurt him- or herself or someone else, and that never happened.

Guys and gals would mostly come in to sort out problems in their personal lives and occasionally to talk about challenges at work. Often employees would simply “vent.” My wife gave me some advice early on that really helped. “When people come to you,” she said, “most of the time they just want to be heard. So don’t try to fix things; just listen.” For the most part, that’s what I did: listen. And my rule was this: if I did talk, I wouldn’t offer answers; I’d just help them with their questions.

It worked out pretty well. Over time employees came to talk not about their challenges but about solutions. And if they didn’t, I would give them a nudge in that direction.

Usually after about 15 minutes of talking things over out loud, they would slap the arms of the Throne and say, “Wow, I sure feel better!” And many times I’d never said a word. I just listened and nodded and gave employees an opportunity to figure out a great solution for themselves. So in the end, the challenges didn’t escalate, they were turned into solutions.

All of these coaching sessions went a long way toward empowering our employees, or more precisely, toward our employees empowering themselves. As a matter of fact, one day someone in HR took me by surprise when she said, “Doc, HR loves you!”

“What?” I said, startled.

“We love having a Coach,” she went on. “We don’t get the messy stuff to deal with that we would otherwise get if the challenges weren’t talked out earlier.”

Pretty cool. I never planned to have that outcome from coaching, but I’m sure glad I did.

What helped employees get comfortable with talking candidly about their everyday issues was a 30-day goal-setting program I introduced.

First, we discussed their overall dream in life. Then, during the sessions, employees learned how to break down their big vision into small,

manageable chunks. That way they could celebrate little successes and weren't so likely to abandon their dream when they hit a rough patch.

We've all set big goals and then two weeks later, life got in the way or we got off track and we quit. In goal setting, I wanted to make it all easy to win and hard to lose.

Second, everyone learned to apply Doc Vik's "80/20 Rule": Stay on track 80 percent of the time; that way, you won't get discouraged or think about quitting if, for 20 percent of the time, you find you've veered off course. The goal-setting program was completely voluntary, and the goals could be work related or personal. (The three most common goals employees set concerned their career, weight loss, and personal financial management.)

There was one teammate who spent a lot of quality time sitting in the throne in my office. She was solution focused, and we would talk about all kinds of things that could and should be taken to the Next Level. She impressed me early by her focus, determination, and passion about empowering others. It didn't take long for others to notice her qualities also. Her name is Augusta Scott, and she's now the Life/Goals Coach at Zappos and is doing a terrific job. As she works on coaching programs, she also heads the speaking team at Zappos. Yep, she and I spent a lot of time together, and I miss her dearly, but I'm proud she is continuing to help take new generations of Zappos employees to the Next Level!

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### **Give them your direct line**

For my chiropractic practice, I had a coach I used to fly out to Arizona to see every month. For three years Dr. Fred and I would get together, and he would coach me through my practice challenges. On one of my visits, I said that I was sometimes inconvenienced by patients calling me at home at all hours of the day and night. There were times when someone would phone me at midnight because he was lying on the kitchen floor unable to move. More than once on a Saturday afternoon I'd hear from someone who had turned awkwardly and now couldn't move her neck without excruciating pain.

Since the best service and experience was what I was all about, I couldn't refuse to answer the phone, make a house call, or meet them at my office. What was I to do? Dr. Fred told me in his stern South African accent, "Give them your home number." I was floored! If I gave my home number to all of my thousands of patients, I would surely be answering the phone at odd hours even more.

"Trust me," Dr Fred said. "If they know that you have their back, no pun intended, they will leave you alone."

A funny thing happened. After I gave my home number to my patients, the off-hours calls stopped. Dr. Fred was right. When my patients knew they could call my home number anytime they had a problem, they stopped calling. They would come in during office hours more regularly, and, whenever they could, they wouldn't wait or put off situations until they became emergencies. When I told them, "I'm glad to see you are doing much better because you haven't called me in quite a while," the patients nearly all responded, "Oh, I still have occasional problems, but you were so nice to give me your home number, I didn't want to bother you. I know you care, and you will always be there for me, and I realized it could wait until normal business hours."

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## WHAT IF HE STAFF . . .

- Met with all the employees individually and just talked or listened to them get things off their chest?
- Gave employees a direct line and personal e-mail too? Employees probably won't use them—at least not often—but they'll feel a lot safer knowing that they have the option.

The results will be better relationships and a channel for open communication.

Here's a suggestion for a job description for a key player in your new Human Empowerment Department:



**Job Title:** Human Empowerment Coach

**Vision/Purpose:** Help employees reach their full potential

**Summary Description:** Empower employees

**Tasks and Responsibilities:** Training, leadership, communication and relationship building

**Functions:** Foster empowerment, teamwork, and unity

**Supervisor/Advisor:** Best-suited person in the HE department  
**Qualifications:** People-oriented person with great energy and leadership abilities along with relationship and communication skills

**Skills Necessary:** Ability to inspire and motivate while maintaining the corporate Culture as the company grows

**Experienced Desired:** Trained Coach and or someone with experience empowering, inspiring, and motivating people; someone who thinks out of the box (perhaps a coach, retired coach, teacher, athlete); corporate background not a prerequisite

**Working Hours:** 3–5 days a week, or whatever will work for the current size or demands of your company