

Was Labor Day Just Another Day Off?

Ask a friend or colleague what's the first thing that pops into their head when they hear "Labor Day" and they'll say "the last day of summer," "a street parade" or, most likely, "a day off."

Few Americans actually understand the historical significance of the first Monday in September, the national holiday that dates back to the late 1800's. The U.S. Dept. of Labor website notes, "Labor Day is a yearly national tribute to the contributions workers have made to the strength, prosperity, and well-being of our country."

Why celebrate labor when it's not supposed to be enjoyed? My wife's most challenging hours were those she spent in labor. When something is extremely difficult, it's said to be labor-intensive. Dangerous criminals get sentenced to hard labor.

There's no way around it...labor is work. And as Mark Twain once quipped, "Work is a necessary evil to be avoided." (Ironic, isn't it that Twain worked so hard to achieve his success?)

But hold on...isn't work what got us where we are? Isn't work what has made America great?

Unfortunately, work/labor is not as celebrated or revered as it once was. When polled and surveyed with the question, "What's the first thing you would do if you won the lottery?" the overwhelming majority of American's respond, "Quit my job." This is further evidenced by the result of workers who have already quit their job but failed to notify their employer. As a consumer, consider the poor quality of the products you buy and the lack of customer service you receive in the marketplace.

Made in America used to mean the best you could get, but now wouldn't you opt for the import? Remember when you used to call customer service and get a friendly voice on the other end? Now it's an endless series of automated commands, long hold times, and hoping you can be connected to a human being you can understand.

Can you imagine how different you would be now had you grown up knowing only this kind of socio-economic climate? You'd have no understanding of what service really looks like and no reverence for words like hard work and labor.

Time Out. Just because you value work, it doesn't mean those who work with you and for you share your affinity for it. And if the reality of this brings on feelings of anger as you wonder why they act entitled and don't take pride in their work...chillax, dude. While the work ethic that was instilled in you through your adolescence has made you

successful, it also serves as a lens by which you judge others. That's not necessarily a good thing and it can work against you.

When you plan ahead for the rush hour and arrive on time and they're late and blame traffic, or when you go the extra mile to dazzle your customers and observe them sleepwalking through another lifeless transaction, don't get angry...get busy leading. Realize they haven't walked in your moccasins and they're not operating from the same owner's manual. So they need you to teach them what they should have been taught at home or at school, but weren't.

Managers post policies and give orders. Leaders develop people. And that comes down to face-to-face coaching.

Sure it's easier to hire people who already possess the same core work ethic values that you have, but that assumes you're fishing from a talent pool that is fully stocked with people like you. And as you have surmised, that pool is dangerously low. So the future belongs to leaders who are able to attract and hire the best, but who are equally committed to developing the rest.

Take a sheet of paper and draw a line separating it into three vertical columns. In the far right column, list the specific attributes you demand from the people you work with including terms like reliability, positive attitude, honesty, cheerfulness, etc. In the first column on the left, list the attributes that you feel are common among most of the people you interview or those that comprise your front line. Those adjectives for many employers include the polar opposite of the items in the third column.

The column in the middle is what ultimately determines your value as a leader. That's where you fill in the specific action steps you are going to take to move the people whose attributes you have described in the left column into people who consistently represent the adjectives in the right column.

No, the challenge of reviving work ethic throughout your organization is not an easy one. There are no silver bullets, simple steps, and presto-chango formulas. And taking on the added responsibility of instilling core work ethic values in your emerging workforce is not one that your boss had when she hired you. It's not fair!

So now that we have that out of the way, are you ready to get to work?

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