

Is Your Company Trapped in the Be-Nos?

A Reality Check for Rules and Regs

This article by Continuum EAP's Kevin J. Mattran was originally published in the Lincoln Human Resources Management Association (LHRMA) newsletter in October of 2006.

There was a rock 'n' roll band that formed around 1969 in the Detroit area; they disbanded in about 1979. Their name was Brownsville Station. Perhaps their biggest hit was a song called "Smokin' in the Boys' Room." The song was about a group of boys doing their best to break the school's no smoking policy and not get caught. For these young men it was a challenge, a game.

We've all been there. I recall as a teenager, when my parents would take a trip out of town, my father would give me a list of what he called the "Be-Nos." The top Be-No was always, "There will **be no** parties!" I never had a "party." However, I often invited groups of friends over to the house for "get togethers."

By this point, you likely have a pretty good idea where this article is headed. Prohibitive or zero tolerance policies can have many loopholes either by being too vague or too specific. More importantly, prohibitive policies focus on control rather than empowerment, on rules over mission. They are also difficult and time consuming to enforce.

This topic idea was suggested by one of our EAP counselors who had recently worked with a client who was very frustrated with some co-workers. The woman complained, "We have a strict no cell phone policy, but a lot of people are still using them for text messaging and other things instead of working."

Perhaps this is an example of a policy that is too specific. A policy that says, "Employees are prohibited from making and receiving cellular telephone calls during working hours" does not address many of the other functions available on most cell phones. For many, this very specific guideline is a license to text, web surf, etc.

So, as you revise and update your company policies, be mindful of the following:

- **Communicate the hows and whys-** Let employees know the mission related reasons for your rules and policies.
- **Anticipate resistance-** Be prepared to answer the "what ifs." People will always point out possible exceptions to rules (What if my child's school needs to get a hold of me?). Have a plan to accommodate the objections.

People are energized by the intrinsic reward their work provides. An abundance of prohibitive rules can drain that same energy. Write policies and guidelines that empower people. Take the afore mentioned cell phone situation and consider something along the lines of the following:

Exceptional customer service and responsiveness are the things that have made XYZ Company successful. In order to maintain our high level of service, we ask that your focus be XYZ Company business during working hours. Every employee is given a morning and afternoon break, as well as a lunch hour, during which personal phone calls can be made, personal electronics (cell phones, MP3 players, hand held computers etc.) may be used, and non-work related activities (reading, homework, knitting etc.) might be enjoyed.

We understand that urgent situations arise during the workday, so any emergency telephone calls received at the switchboard will be transferred, or the employee will be paged, immediately.

From a performance management standpoint, it is much easier to track productivity according to a well-communicated list of objectives than it is to police prohibited behavior. If an employee is not meeting expectations, a manager can address possible reasons in performance reviews or one-on-one meetings.

Where are you spending most of your time and energy-enforcing rules, or reinforcing the company's mission?

*For help with this or any other organizational issue, contact Continuum EAP at:
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