COMMUNITY VOICES

Two Things That Shaped My Role as an HR Executive

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One of the most common questions I get as an HR executive is how I got to where I am today. It's a tough one to answer, given that my career path has been a series of twists and turns, successes and setbacks. I owe many important learning moments to managers I had earlier in my career, because without them I wouldn't have found my way to my role at Workday. Most of them embodied great leadership qualities such as approachability, respect for others, and the ability to inspire interns and CEOs alike.

While I strive to be all of those things to my team, there are a couple of specific lessons I've learned along the way that have significantly influenced how I view leadership.

All roads lead to the customer

Early in my career, I worked on the shop floor at Home Depot. As part of my management training, I rotated into an assistant store manager position, and the team I found myself leading was full of highly experienced master-tradespeople. I quickly realised that my lovely college degree was of zero use when customers wanted to know how to fix their leaky taps or install new light fixtures. No amount of friendliness could overcome the fact that I simply couldn't answer those questions. Yet, our experienced associates were helping customers find exactly what they needed.

That's when I realised all that truly matters is how you service your customers. Companies have a lot of smart people doing impressive work, but if that work isn't laser-focused on the experience you're creating for your customer, it's misdirected.

While I was far from the best associate at Home Depot, I learned a great deal from my co-workers and today, I can hold my own with most home improvement projects. When I returned to corporate after my time in the store, I brought with me that valuable, first-hand perspective that helped our team deliver more valuable support to our employees working at the point of sale.

Be open and empathetic

I learned another important career lesson from a wonderful former boss. I had just become a people manager for the first time, and was focused on ensuring my employees felt important. My relationships with them were fine, but I maintained a very professional demeanour, never revealing too much about myself or prying into their lives.

My boss, though, was great at connecting with his employees on a much deeper level. He eventually pulled me aside and made some suggestions on how to be explicit when expressing appreciation, and to spend more time getting to know and understand my employees. This was enlightening for me because I did care, but apparently hadn't been doing a very good job of showing it.

We've all discovered that people are happier and more productive when their managers care about them on a personal level. As a manager, one of the first steps I've taken to achieve this level of trust is to share things about myself. There's a balance between being personal and being professional, but by being more open, employees will feel more comfortable talking about themselves and what's important to them.

In the end, building leadership skills is about exploring the world outside of your comfort zone and establishing a foundation of trust and communication with your colleagues. There's always more we can learn, and finding ways to be more present will open the door to new experiences.

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