

Building your legacy at work

By Elaine Varelas, *09/02/2008*

When we think about people leaving a legacy, we often conjure up images of the rich, famous, and powerful: presidents, popes, royalty, and celebrities. And we usually only start talking about a legacy after that person has died. In fact, we all leave a legacy, in life and at work — and we can influence that legacy especially if we have many years still ahead of us.

If you gave your notice today, how would you be remembered by your colleagues and company leadership? Would they still be talking about you next week, next year, in five years? Were you the deal-closer, the hot head, the star manager, or the person who instituted a major policy initiative?

You may have no immediate plans to leave your company, which puts you in a perfect position to start thinking about what you want your legacy to be, and gives you time to build it. Of course, we all leave our jobs and organizations at some point, for any number of reasons. Some departures are involuntary: an untimely death, organizational change, or downsizing. There are also many positive reasons for saying goodbye — a new job, a move, retirement, or time off for family or education. Regardless of the reason, we all leave a legacy in our wake.

As an HR manager, think about what you want your own legacy to look like. How do you want your organization to know you, now and after you're gone? There are many ways to leave your mark, and not all of us want the same thing. What is important to you? What parts of your work do you most value? What gets you excited? Is there a need in the organization you can fill? Don't be afraid to think big-grand-scale ideas can transform a company.

You can make contributions affecting people or policy. The policy initiatives have an impact on the business, the organizational structure, or production. People contributions focus on the culture, work teams, and how employees are treated and valued. Both are important, and it's best when they overlap. Where do you want to concentrate? Do you want to be the HR manager who designed a new benefits manual or instituted an important policy; the one who created a paperless office where employees can access all of their HR programs online; or perhaps you want to initiate a mediation practice. The opportunities to influence the organization's culture and programs are endless.

Thinking of your job in terms of how you will leave it presents a different way to look at your work and what you want to accomplish. Instead of focusing on day-to-day tasks, it helps you to focus on the bigger picture and take a more global view of your work. Consider your own job, your team, your department, the leadership, and how these pieces are interconnected to make the organization whole. How will you leave your thumbprint?

This exercise is a great way for HR managers to bring a different perspective to their work, and

it can also be helpful for other employees in the organization. But it's a new concept and many HR managers and company leaders are surprised to learn that their employees want to leave a mark on the organization. Employees want to know that they had a positive impact on their colleagues, that the work they did mattered, or perhaps that the company internalized an initiative they launched. HR managers may want to consider incorporating this exercise into the review process. Instead of the typical and tired questions ("What do you want to accomplish this year?" and "Where do you see yourself in five years?"), encourage employees to frame their annual and long-term goals around their legacies.

Leadership may also benefit from structuring their work goals around their own legacies. What do they want their employees to be saying about them five or ten years after they depart? Do they want to expand the business, change the direction of the company, or develop a program that will change how employees work?

HR managers can also help employees and leadership develop strategies to help them reach their goals — and affect their legacies. What are the first steps they will need to take? What is a realistic timeline? Who else will need to be on the team? Goals can only become reality if there is a workable plan in place.

Thinking about your job in terms of the legacy you leave brings a fresh perspective to your work. It gives you a longer term view, and helps you make better decisions because you look at your job not just in a vacuum, but how it influences and impacts the entire organization. You don't need to be a pope or a politician to make a difference. How will your colleagues remember you?

Originally published at http://www.boston.com/jobs/hire_authority/090208.shtml