

The relationship is the asset

"Our people are our greatest asset!" - how often have we seen some company make that proud claim? But just stop and think about it for a moment: what does it actually mean?

Assets are things: they can be bought, sold, bartered, traded, owned. And that's not a good way to describe the people who work with you. It's not a good way to describe yourself.

People can't be owned: the moment we think otherwise, we're in deep trouble. To describe people as 'assets' is an insult; describing them as 'human resources' is possibly worse. Either way, corporations usually get what they deserve. Surly, disaffected robots tend not to be very productive; but people in organizations which do respect this human side of systems tend to be very productive indeed.

The key to that productivity is a shift in perspective. A corporation's 'greatest asset' is not our people, but its relationships with those people. After a decade or two of downsizing, people aren't expendable any more: if not treated with respect, 'our' knowledge, skill, inventiveness and creativity will just walk out the door and go work someplace else. And if the people can't walk out, they'll just shut down - and expend most of their energies on office politics instead.

So the relationship is the asset - not the people. It's the link to 'our people', the reason for 'our people' to want to work with the company, to express the company's purpose. No relationship, no reason to work: it's as simple as that.

A relationship isn't something that can be ordered, demanded, bought, sold, owned: it either is, or isn't, and it's up to us as to which it will be. The relationship involves far more than mere money: it's about treating people as people, not coin-in-the-slot work-machines - as human beings, not 'human resources'. If ignored, those relationships can soon fade away to nothing; they can fall apart very quickly if they're based on bullying or cajoling, or one-sided 'agreements'. And if we want 'our people' to be productive, it's our responsibility to ensure that the right relationship exists between us.

This isn't about being 'nice' to people - though that attitude would certainly help, as long as it's for real. It's more that those relationships are our company's greatest asset - perhaps the company's only real asset - and we need to take care to protect them as such. Time to do a serious rethink about those relationships, perhaps?

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