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BS jobs: Should you evaluate yours?

In evaluating your company's organizational structure, how many positions are superfluous? Would eliminating some or all of the administrative or managerial positions hurt the bottom line? Would it hurt or improve morale? And what about the employees in those roles? Do they realize their jobs may be meaningless? Can their jobs be delegated to others without skipping a beat? Are they happy stuck in a position that serves little purpose and adds even less value to the company?

David Graeber, anthropologist at the London School of Economics and author of "Bullshit Jobs" (Simon & Schuster, 2018), addressed these issues unapologetically. He wrote about unnecessary tasks performed at companies around the globe. He was not referring to teachers, mechanics, farmers, plumbers, gravediggers, trash collectors, first responders or medical specialists. Rather, Graeber defined B.S. work as "a form of paid employment that is so completely pointless, unnecessary, or pernicious that even the employee cannot justify its existence even though, as part of the conditions of employment, the employee feels obliged to pretend that this is not the case."

The 'taskmaster'

Of the five categories of B.S. jobs that Graeber describes in his book, one such category is the "taskmaster." The taskmaster is defined, in part, as a person who manages people who don't need managing. Taskmasters can be found in both public and private companies and government. Taskmasters' roles include, among other things, completing meaningless reports about company metrics which are presented to superiors and tend to be of limited value, if even referenced at all.

Some taskmasters can argue that their jobs are critical to the success of their company. After all, without their reports, data, information and statistics, how, pray tell, could this business operate? Who would gather the data for the reports discussed at board meetings? And who would be the liaison between leadership and staff? Who would calculate the measurables? Prepare goals and track ROI? Create project budgets? Evaluate core competencies, synergies, capacities and deliverables?

The work performed by taskmasters begs two questions. First, do industry leaders realize that the additional layer of middle manager is sometimes irrelevant and meaningless? And if not, why not?

Perhaps the added layer justifies the

LAURA L.
RUBENSTEIN
Commentary



inflated salaries of upper management. Or, perhaps top managers prefer to read the data provided by middle management over having face-to-face interactions with real worker bees. Perhaps the biggest supporters of taskmasters are those top managers who prefer sitting in their ivory towers to dressing in work boots and hard hats and interacting with those who are making the real money for the business.

Second, do taskmasters realize their jobs are unnecessary? The enlightened ones do. Enlightened taskmasters understand their jobs are redundant and make themselves approachable because their jobs hang in the balance. These benevolent taskmasters motivate subordinates with a carrot rather than a stick and advocate for subordinates, even though their advocacy carries little weight. This creates trust between the employee and the taskmaster, which is a valued benefit in companies today.

The unenlightened ones

On the other hand, unenlightened taskmasters believe their positions are critical to the organizational structure. These unenlightened taskmasters toe the company line, cannot keep confidences, and will find ways to regularly prop themselves up at the expense of their subordinates. Some of these types of taskmasters may terrorize subordinates by threatening jobs, salaries and livelihoods to keep subordinates in line and to tamp down real issues.

Unenlightened taskmasters create distrust. One unintended consequence is a company culture of disgruntled workers who feel resentment with nowhere to turn. This is when companies find themselves in the headlines or on the other side of the "v" because taskmasters cause more harm than good in trying to manage issues. These taskmasters are not trained on company policy, fail to understand harassment, discrimination and retaliation, don't partner with human resources, and may even believe that policies don't apply to them.

Another issue raised by Graeber is that taskmasters may not be working as much as businesses think. While the timesheets may reflect 40 hours a week, it is significantly less. On average, taskmasters put in closer to 15 hours per week of substantive work. The majority of their time is spent coordinating lunch plans with co-workers, chatting about personal matters, gossiping about colleagues, attending training seminars to make them better managers, surfing the internet and viewing social media websites.

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Maybe it's time for employers to pull back the curtain. If you're a company or organization that employs taskmasters, think about evaluating the purpose and cost; survey what others think of the position; and consider ways to make the positions more meaningful. Can they perform other tasks or assume other delegated duties? In a capitalist society like ours, one would think that profit-seeking corporations would steer away from spending crucial profits on non-essential salaried staff doing part-time work.

Laura L. Rubenstein is a partner in the labor and employment practice group at Wright, Constable & Skeen LLP in Baltimore. She can be reached at lrubenstein@wcslaw.com.