

HR and the Church

Geraldine Crudge

I had always thought HR (Human Resources) was such a wishy-washy area that I couldn't be bothered with it... So many rules! So much talking! So much paperwork! So little obvious fruit! And then I started working as an employment lawyer in the HR division of an organisation that employs over 8,500 people and realised good HR practices lead to less need for employment lawyers, less hurt people, and less confusion.

I know HR doesn't sound spiritual. I know HR can sometimes seem like processes for process sake, but to honour God I think we need to take HR seriously, because ultimately it means taking people seriously.

So, five thoughts on HR in the church. Whilst I'm specifically talking here about employment arrangements, much of this could also apply to terms of call.

Hiring: you don't have to advertise a job, but you'd be a fool not to take references.

If you have someone in mind for a role, and have possibly tailored a job description for them, why would you advertise a job and let others apply when you know who you're going to select? It doesn't seem to honour anyone.

On the other hand, if you have identified someone for a role (either directly or after interviews), call their referees. They may have insight for you into the person's strengths and weaknesses that you haven't yet identified.

Referees are under a legal obligation to answer your questions honestly – so go nuts! Ask away! And be mindful about *who* your candidate has given you as a referee – and who they haven't (often who they haven't named can speak volumes too....).

Contracts and words matter.

Ensure your employment agreements comply with the law and set out the key details of your employment arrangement.

If you employ someone for a fixed amount of time, you need to have a valid legal reason for doing so and include that in the contract.

If you change things up – write it down. For example, if a year into the role you decide to increase someone's hours, or substantially change the scope of their role, the employment agreement needs to change – especially if it's for a fixed amount of time to cover, say, a sabbatical.

Don't rely on the fact that everyone loves Jesus – memories fade, recall is different, and a document in black and white that sets out what everyone agreed at the time can save a lot of heartache down the track.

Words matter.

Be consistent in what your vision of the role is and what the contract says.

If you say you're going to work together with someone as equals, yet give them a contract as an Associate Pastor, how serious are you about equality?

If you say the future of the church is in this new area and God is calling the church into it, yet only offer a contract for a year, are you being consistent?

I get that the line between faith and good stewardship is hard to walk. But be careful that your "God language" matches your employment agreements.

Don't oversell a vision and underdeliver with the documentation. Which leads onto the fact that:

God knows about employment law.

A church leader felt that God had given him a new vision for worship and youth in his church, and as part of that it was time for his current worship leader, of many years' service, to move on. I don't doubt his discernment, but it seems unlikely that God was unaware of the laws around redundancy and restructuring.

Telling his worship leader his vision and asking her when she was going to leave, without going through a restructuring process was unwise.

Relying on your staff to "do the honourable thing" when staff numbers need to decrease and leave graciously is not fair or honourable – the law provides a process for how to restructure or achieve change in your staff team that allows all voices to be heard and employees to be protected.

Take notes of key meetings/reviews.

Contemporaneous notes are so much better than your memory, six months later, about what you thought you said or what you thought you agreed.

Send notes of the meeting to the employee – a quick email summary is fine!

Just because everyone is playing nicely now does not guarantee that will be the case in a year's time. If you do need to seek outside assistance, your adviser will love you for having kept notes along the way.

Spiritual leader vs being the boss.

If your employee is also attending your church, have you had a conversation around being their boss and being their pastoral leader?

Have you talked around boundaries of what is "work time" and what is "voluntary time"?

How do you differentiate between caring pastorally for someone at the same time as asking them to improve their work performance?

And have you documented these conversations in case you need them later...?

Good comms and good documents go a long way towards improving employment relationships, having clear understanding, and honouring Jesus.

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