

MISSION & MOTIVATION

Little Victories, Big Impact

Moving from corporate HR to an independent school requires a different pace and close attention to a school's culture — as well as its many calendars.



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In 2011, I left my corporate career at a large law firm to stay home with my small kids. My more than 20 HR peers at the firm were great colleagues, and I always refer to leaving as the “easiest, hardest decision” I ever made. But as an independent school graduate who grew up in a family of educators and school administrators, rejoining the workforce at Open Window School was a wonderful opportunity.

Initially part-time and now a full-time employee, I am still amazed at the anomalous event of school-year breaks where work does not multiply in my absence because *everyone* is on vacation. Yet along with the positive changes came challenges when transitioning from corporate HR to an independent school. After nearly six years at the school, I would recommend to other people making the change to start small, reach out and go with the flow.

START SMALL

An independent school employing its first HR person is much like a startup company reaching a critical point where transactional or outsourced HR no longer serves its needs. However, while startups embrace rapid change and scalable standardization, an independent school has a strong culture, deep values and habits that have been cultivated for decades. Change, even when necessary, is not always enthusiastically embraced and can often be rebuffed as “too corporate.”

When I started at Open Window School, I felt confident in my new role assessing immediate needs and centralizing HR and payroll functions. In addition to the transactional aspect of the role (entering benefit changes, processing payroll, making address changes, etc.), I was looking to add the strategic piece of HR (e.g., employment practices that would bring down turnover and increase engagement).

Whenever I got discouraged that I was not able to implement and update things at my accustomed (corporate) pace, I switched gears and focused on small things: small positive interactions, small successful projects, small suggestions. These helped me build credibility and trust, and demonstrated I could contribute to the school's continued success. One teacher's positive experience encouraged

another teacher to seek me out when they also had a question. The success of one small change encouraged leadership to try another project. Focusing on the small made a large impact.

REACH OUT

Even with the best co-workers, being an “HR department of one” can be isolating. Reaching out to professional peers helped me find the support I was missing. I am thankful for our attorneys, who can be a great resource when I need confirmation on how to proceed in a sticky situation, or when I know a situation could significantly impact the school but colleagues don't see it.

The HR forums on NBOA Connect and attending the NBOA conferences provide great camaraderie and a chance to talk with other HR professionals, many of whom have a shared experience of a prior corporate life. Learning what other schools are doing is also helpful when I can demonstrate that a peer school has been successful making a similar change.

More broadly, I keep up with my local HR professional organization. It allows me to maintain my knowledge, keep a pulse on regional and national trends, and talk with HR practitioners from small businesses and nonprofits who have similar organizational challenges.

GO WITH THE FLOW

In any environment, HR is cyclical, but this is heightened in a school. In my corporate life, I was casually mindful of how the time of year would impact various projects. Everything ran on a January-through-December calendar year, and everyone was largely available 12 months of the year. Now I am keenly aware of the school's fiscal year, benefit plan year, tax year and academic year, all of which are different! Going with the flow is not about being passive. It is about being mindful of when I can get the most effective and efficient work done. Sometimes this means I better get something done immediately or it may not happen for several months or even next year. Going with the flow means not fighting against a calendar with few and specific days for all-staff trainings, accepting that August and September will be exhausting — and remembering that winter break is just around the corner. **N**

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