

November 2009

## **You Can Call Me Hal**

A couple of weeks ago, a small group of HR folks from various schools got together by phone to talk through some of the most pressing issues currently keeping us busy. In the general conversation, one issue struck me as administratively complex in a general sense. (Welcome to HR, yes?) It's still more troubling as a potential roadblock for our organizations in the effort to create succession planning and promote the growth and development of our highly talented employees. It is also tangled in the web of comp systems, affecting our ability to create, adjust or maintain integrity in compensation.

The issue is the process (or lack thereof) of creating titles for our administrative staff in managerial leadership roles. In some schools, most notably public institutions, titles reflect the "graded" compensation system, or "levels" of pay, responsibility, or authority. In others, the compensation system may be based on these grades or levels, with a great deal of autonomy within departments to be creative about "naming" the job. In a large number of our institutions, the titles of leaders across departments, units or centers are variable to a confusing degree.

I recall beginning my career in academia thinking that I would make it one of my priorities to bring some consistency to the process of naming senior administrators. Twelve years later, I retired, leaving the job to those with more resilience, stamina, and patience! The barriers are cultural and hierarchical, to be sure. But they also certainly reflect a need within our communities for the recognition of institutional value.

Often, bargaining unit contracts, past practice, or tradition mandate or limit the ways in which we recognize and reward our most talented, highly capable and engaged managers and staff. Titles become a part of the local internal effort to reflect value and responsibility. Yet, the creativity and invention employed in setting one person apart from another by virtue of a descriptive title can lead to disgruntlement and a lack of trust in our systems as people read intended and unintended judgment into a conferred title.

Is it necessary to "fix" the problem? That seems to depend largely upon the organization and its leaders. Is there a difference in your institution between a Department Administrator and an Administrative Director? We might debate the relative "worth" of the person who hopes for a title somewhere along the lines of "Queen of a Small Principality" while another responsible and accountable for the very same administrative management is simply the "Manager of Administration". Size and scope of the department as part of the whole might be one of the determining factors, but often the argument ends with the conclusion that, as long as they did the same work for the same pay, the titles can be considered nearly meaningless. In my experience, several of those directly involved in this work – and their faculty chairs -- have some mighty strong disagreement with that notion. Small fires of jealousy and resentment can often be ignited in this debate.

One of the most important jobs we have in the present environment of eroded trust and distress about employment security is that of leading the organization through the change required to bring about economic leveling. While the issue of allowing widely differing titles for the same or very similar work may seem like a little fire, the distrust and feelings of dismissal are real indeed to those whose work worth are vitally important to them and to their department heads.

If you manage human resources in an institution where title integrity is an issue, what is at risk? Do you have Assistant, Associate, Senior, and Managing adjectives in front of your titles? Are they consistently evaluated? Most of us have done a great deal of work on establishing guidelines and criteria for setting titles and salary. The key is in communicating and monitoring the process, of course. If there is an odd or special title in the system in schools, it seems to result primarily from a desire on the part of a department chair, head, or dean to be sure that a particular person is recognized “outside the system”. This begs the particular question: Does the system as it exists fit the circumstances of how we wish to pay and recognize? Can we change it?

When your human resource operation is part of a larger academic or clinical organization, constraints exist as to how far you may go with titles, grades, pay, bonuses, and so on. One correspondent says that the conferring of a title that may seem inflated is “the only way under the current economic situation that I can make a terrific employee happy.” We can all understand that problem, but we need to be sure that we are thinking creatively about this issue as we – hopefully – come out from under that economic cloud in the future.

How are you doing with this issue?

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