A Q&A with Helena Rodrigues: The importance of listening in the era of reshuffling

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Millions of Americans left their jobs during the pandemic to seek new opportunity, often changing their profession or field of work altogether. This massive shift in personnel was coined the "great resignation" in 2021. It has since been relabeled the "great reshuffle" as employees start over with new companies – or in entirely new careers.

The University of Arizona was not immune to the effects of either phenomenon, says Helena Rodrigues, vice president and chief human resources officer. She recently spoke at "The Great Reshuffling: A Perfect Storm or the New Norm," a panel discussion held by the Center for the Philosophy of Freedom, where she and other business leaders talked about how they are grappling with the realities of a new labor market.

Rodrigues, who marks 16 years at the University this month, later shared with Lo Que Pasa what she has learned as an HR executive over the past few years, and how the University can recruit and retain a diverse workforce in the era of the "great reshuffling."

What are the goals of human resources, and how have you seen your industry change in the last few years?

We try to provide the environment and the resources people need to be successful, particularly those responsible for leading a team. Often, professionals ascend into a management or leadership role because they're very good at what they do in their field, but they may not have had the chance yet to cultivate the skill set to mentor others, to identify the strengths and weaknesses in a team to best play to strengths, and to delegate responsibilities and assign projects accordingly. The most common reason an individual leaves an organization is a supervisor, and as such, much of our work needs to focus on supporting good leadership and successful management of teams. Individual employees need support too, and it could be helping them have difficult conversations with a supervisor or a colleague, navigating career decisions, or sometimes we're just directing people to resources that are not our own but are somewhere else here in the institution.

I think that the COVID-19 pandemic put a spotlight on HR, and HR professionals had to rise to several different challenges. With the great resignation and reshuffling, we're advising more than ever on retention, effective recruiting, and on creating and maintaining healthy working environments where people feel challenged and valued and want to continue to be a part of the organization.

What attributes or characteristics does the University possess that make it a place people want to work, and how do you show off those strengths?

We do extraordinary work here in support of our mission to educate students and conduct world-class research. Everyone directly impacts that mission, regardless of what they do for the University. For individuals in human resources or another administrative unit, you are working with a diversity of clients that you wouldn't necessarily have in a different organization, such as internationally recognized academic departments and research programs like the Poetry Center or Steward Observatory. No day is "typical," and our everyday challenges require creative problem-solving and collaboration with colleagues and partners across our campus communities.

I believe it's everyone's responsibility to show off those strengths. When we talk to units that are struggling to recruit talent, we sometimes have to get down to the basics and look at the job description. What are they doing to tell prospective applicants about their unit, the team and their recent initiatives? It's not that you don't want to talk about the job, but you should also consider addressing what would make the work environment attractive to an applicant – maybe even more so, and less about the job responsibilities and required skills. People have options and are doing their homework on where they might next seek a job. They're looking at whether there is diversity among leadership teams, the demographics of the employee population, and whether recent initiatives are aligned with their values. They are examining culture – and asking if this is a place they want to be a part of.

Gen Z is now entering the workforce and millennials are working higher up the corporate ladder every year. Are they any different than their older colleagues?

Millennials and Gen Z are different in a really good way. As a Gen Xer, I have benefited tremendously from working as part of a multi-generational workforce. Millennials are the biggest portion of the workforce right now and will continue to be so for some time.

When I think about the differences among the generations in the workforce, I see millennials and Gen Z wanting promotional opportunities, growth assignments, work-life balance and flexibility. They do not shy from challenging the status quo, and these characteristics are all good things for organizational climate. The most common concern I hear from
managers who are in their mid-40s and older is the perception and generalization of their younger colleagues that they
don't want to work as hard as they did when they were that age, or at that stage in their career. That's just not true. In
almost all cases, it's about working differently and considering different approaches to our work, and in that lies a
tremendous opportunity for organizations and leaders.

How do you appeal to their wants and needs as employees?

We can all do more listening, particularly as we continue to live in a world disrupted by the pandemic and other global
challenges. Every member of a workforce wants to be heard and asked for their feedback, and our structures and
processes can sometimes get in the way of that.

Once you hire someone at the University, how do you keep them here?

It's not usually pay that drives someone to look elsewhere for employment, but it can be a deciding factor once someone
has begun entertaining their options elsewhere. I think our opportunities for retention of employees begin by making sure
they have good leaders and mentors and have a healthy climate to work and grow professionally in, every day. Keeping
people from leaving is also about identifying the signals that they might be looking for other work and responding promptly
by having direct, candid conversations with care, asking what's going on and inviting them to safely share feedback.
Perhaps most critical is being ready to listen to that feedback and make a change. That's hard, but it is the job of any
leader, and employees value leaders who listen and hold themselves accountable.

How do you make everyone feel important and heard, regardless of their position in the chain of command?

Start by asking their name, their role at the University, and what they enjoy most about their work. I really believe in the
power of small talk and how it can build trust and lead to positive exchanges with people. Everyone's role here is
important, and regardless of what it is, it directly impacts the mission of the University. Invite people to serve on projects
and initiatives and be less prescriptive about what expertise or background they must have to participate. Facilitate
discussions about the "why" behind decisions, which will help with people feeling engaged and valued.

What advice would you give to a first-time job seeker, or an early-career employee looking to advance their
career?

If I could go back to my younger self or when I graduated from college, I would say there are many more ways you can
have a positive impact in the world. It's not restricted to certain fields, and it is not restricted to professional work. Find
what you are good at and keep trying if you don't figure it out right away. If while doing that you also discover your passion
and you're having fun – you've reached something like a dream state. Not all of us get to achieve that, but the journey in
trying to do so is full of rewards.

I would also tell my younger self to worry a lot less, speak up more often and be brave. I have had mentors tell me not to
bother sitting in a meeting or participating in a discussion if I am not going to say something. Harsh, but you want to learn
from any job that you're in. You don't have to love the work, but finding something that makes you feel connected to
others or to a mission will prompt you to ask questions and learn about yourself and wonder what's next. The opportunities
to do this kind of exploration reside in so many more places than we might realize.

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