

When We Get it **BADLY** Wrong

Recently freed from the shackles of corporate life, my pal Richard has been waxing somewhat lyrical with his memories of the good, and bad life, in the corridors of power. A life-long human resources man, he has seen it all and then some. Last week he told me about an old CEO of his, who hated every personnel person ever born, believing that they should be wrapped in a sack at birth and quickly drowned.

One day the CEO was asked to come along to the annual conference of all the human resources directors from around the world. The CEO duly turned up, carrying a large cardboard box. He proceeded to walk around the large oval table (there were about 30 HR directors present) and hand out plastic, model animals. As the motley crew of HR experts focused in on these, they realised with a collective gulp that they were dinosaurs! Seeing the consternation and confusion on their faces, the CEO gleefully explained. "I want you to go back to your countries and put these on your desks," he grinned, "and look at them every morning when you come to work and realise just what you are!"

So are [some] HR people really bad? Well, in a career spanning many decades I have seen a few, probably, avoidable disasters. Here's a sample clutch to make you cringe.

This one speaks volumes for the inability of the English (let's not tarnish the Scots with this) to understand that we don't all work in the same time zone. Some years ago, a certain airline closed its office in Luxembourg in the most wonderful way: they sent a telex to the manager, in the mistaken idea that he was in his office at 08.00, before the staff arrived. It was, of course, one hour later and the staff got to see the news that their office was being closed immediately, before the manager did. Nice work chaps!

Another airline had a long-running dispute with its Brussels' based manager and determined to move him out in case he did any damage. One manager was detailed to fly in and take him out to lunch, while the other had the locks on the office doors changed. All was going well until the so-called "victim", well used to the alcoholic-driven business ways of the Belgian capital, managed to get the executive detailed to decoy him out of the way into a seriously inebriated state. Staggering back to the offices they found a Belgian

locksmith hard at work and no sign of the manager charged with getting the locks changed (he had already, thinking his job complete, gone back on an early flight). The other, by now totally legless, manager got packed off in a taxi to the airport and their man in Brussels, pocketed the new keys. Such was the embarrassment, that no one knew for three weeks that he hadn't been dismissed!

Neither do the American always get it right. Many moons ago, a major U.S. multinational dispatched one of its keenest young high-flyers off to Europe to decimate the headquarters operation by around 40 percent. Using the six hour time difference (and an overnight flight) to full advantage, a sympathetic guy in New York called Paris and all the senior managers went off on a "conference". When the keen young man arrived at Paris H.Q. no decision-makers were there. As he flew in, they flew out. It took months of negotiation to begin to sort that.

Can it get worse? Of course it can

I had always joked with several friends of mine about those apocryphal stories about executives going on vacation and on their return finding someone else's name on the door and a new man in the job. That was nothing like what happened to my friend Larry. He went on a month's vacation to the U.S. – taking his new bride with him – when he got back he hadn't just lost his office, the building wasn't there either! The company, a small U.S. pharmaceuticals firm, had sold off their European interests and just moved out. No one told him, and to this day he has still not received any compensation.

Of course the other great story concerns me. One of my early employers – the European headquarters of a U.S. multinational – actually had two Mike Johnson's working for it: me in communications, the other guy in human resources (personnel it was then). One day, the grim corporate reaper from the U.S. arrived and shaved a few percentage points off the headcount. My name was on the list. I was new and cheap to fire. However, by an accident – that I always deny having anything to do with – the other guy got it instead.

But then again, one communicator against one personnel guy, isn't that a no contest decision? Well isn't it?