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OPINION

Today's Business: Management's return to the golden rule

Reese Mitchell

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Reese Mitchell; Contributed photo

For the last 40 years, private-sector union membership has collapsed. In 1983, private-sector union membership stood at more than 20 percent. By 2021, that rate had dwindled to just 6.3 percent.

Today, that trend seems halted and may even be reversing. Private-sector unions are in the news. Local Amazon and Starbucks employees successfully are unionizing. The new Teamsters president threatened a nationwide strike against UPS. Organized labor is flexing its muscles. The question is, why?

Part of the answer is straightforward: management has forgotten the "golden rule." Many corporate leaders forgot that an essential way to keep a workforce happy is to treat employees with respect and dignity. Unrealistic and even unpleasant workplace goals and expectations create dissatisfied employees, making them more susceptible to organized labor. Management's drive to be as profitable and efficient as possible — with little regard for worker job satisfaction — can be a fertile ground for collective action.

On the surface, employers have a lot going for them. Many traditional union gripes now are addressed by federal, state and local laws and regulations.

Minimum wage and overtime laws force employers to act more justly. OSHA and other workers' compensation systems help provide safe working conditions and some financial protection after a workplace injury. Termination because of discrimination is unlawful.

A company's failure to meet government's minimum standards brings the specter of litigation, potential fines and bad publicity.

For the last 30 years, even corporate management has addressed many grievances that made unions look attractive. Companies adopted internal policies of progressive discipline, for example.

The birth of the modern human resources department emerged, providing management with a way to interface with employees and address problems and concerns. Companies were listening to their employees and at least trying to address their concerns.

Then something changed.

In many companies, both large and small, the human resources department became overwhelmed, pulled in multiple directions by an ever-changing corporate and regulatory landscape. Employers emphasized internal policies, procedures and proper forms to meet government regulatory requirements. The interaction between the employee and the company became just one more set of issues in a web of conflicting priorities — often faceless and formal. Employee complaints and grievances began to go unnoticed or lost in a bureaucratic maze.

Many low-wage jobs are tedious, repetitive, demanding and often back-breaking. Employers, such as those at Amazon, have their employees monitored to ensure optimum efficiency. Because of remoteness between management and labor, minor issues and concerns become magnified.

Today, more and more workers are considering collective action to resolve issues and make their voices heard and that could well be counterproductive for all stakeholders. A union inserts an additional layer between the employer and employee and can prevent an effective, productive dialogue. The employee finds that a union's concern is often for the collective group and not the individual.

Individual problems and concerns become hostage to the greater good of the entire bargaining unit. Employers, meanwhile, spend money and time negotiating with the bargaining unit, often over trivial minutia.

So, what can be done?

The most cost-effective measure is to reallocate time and money resources to ease the overburdened human resources department. A single-person human resources department for a company of, say, 300 or 400 workers no longer is adequate. Corporations — and small businesses, too — should use the human resources function not so much as a depository for forms, policies and procedures but as an effective tool to hear and then address employee grievances. Employers need to pivot from viewing their employees as faceless and nameless automatons and seeing them as people who deserve respect and appreciation.

Not only will that help avoid unionization, but it will help with employee retention, so critical in today's marketplace. In addition, management should not view labor relations management as a one-time event when the specter of unionization occurs, but needs to be an ongoing effort to keep a workforce happy.

In the long run, a well-operating human resources department will save an employer money and resources otherwise spent dealing with unions or finding replacement workers for those disgruntled workers leaving for greener pastures. Minor investments in treating employees with dignity and concern can save significant costs.

Reese Mitchell is an attorney at Stratford-based Mitchell & Sheahan, P.C. He is involved in handling all types of employment matters, including through all stages of the litigation process. He can be reached at 203-873-0240 or ReeseMitchell@mitchellandsheahan.com.