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Sage HR Advice from Football Coaches

We're at the halfway point of the regular college football season and the NFL will soon be at that point. Considering how these coaches have to motivate and manage players, support staff, boosters, NIL contributors, and other relationship partners, I thought it would be interesting to consider how their experiences can relate to HR's leadership role.

Here are some of my favorites:

"You have freedom of choice. You don't have freedom of consequences."
--Curt Cignetti (Indiana), 2025 National Champion; record at IU of 33-3.

Employee choices, including "free speech" on personal time and platforms may be considered for work-related consequences.

"If what you did yesterday seems big, you haven't done anything today."
--Lou Holtz, 1988 National Champion, Notre Dame.

Great performance should be lauded, but past victories can't be used to excuse missed performance metrics—or worse, misconduct—in the future. Daily excellence is the expectation; if you do that today, you get to come back to work and try again tomorrow.

"Treat a person as he is, and he will remain as he is. Treat him as he could be, and he will become what he should be."
--Jimmy Johnson, National Championship, University of Miami; two Super Bowl wins, Dallas Cowboys.

HR facilitates the development of the workforce with other members of the leadership team. A leader often receives what's expected, but is enough expected?

"Mediocre people don't like high achievers, and high achievers don't like mediocre people."
--Nick Saban, seven national championships, Alabama and LSU.

Your workforce wants HR and other leaders to hold employees accountable. Often when a marginal employee is terminated, the reaction from other employees is "What took you so long?"

"A good coach will make his players see what they can be rather than what they are."
--Ara Parseghian, Notre Dame.

For HR and other leadership team members, what emphasis is placed on development? Are performance evaluation tools utilized to identify who can

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become an even greater contributor or are they an annual hoop to jump through that can feel meaningless to the managers completing them?

"We don't live in our fears. We live in our hopes."
--Mike Tomlin, Super Bowl champion, Pittsburgh Steelers.

Human Resources gets a bad rap for saying no. Lawyers share a similar reputation. Both groups should check in with their stakeholders to ensure their advice reflects their organizations' risk tolerance, recognizing that employment decisions made in the real world aren't going to meet textbook standards of perfection. Also, as HR is often a key leader in internal messaging, they should intentionally train and guide leadership to project optimism, even during difficult times.

Human Resources and business leaders can gain insight from reviewing leaders in totally unrelated fields. May your favorite college or pro team exceed your expectations this season!

If you have any questions or would like additional information, please contact Richard Lehr (the only Indiana football fan we've ever met, at least in the great state of Alabama) at (205) 323-9260 or rlehr@lmvtlaw.com.

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