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The Human Resources Specialist Interview: Jordan Harris

The Troy School District has had a reputation in the past of having human resources relations that have been... shall we say... lacking. For over a decade, there had existed bad blood between certain central office administrators and the rest of the Troy workforce. Bargaining was brutal. Pay steps were frozen. Hiring practices were questionable. These grievances extended to almost everyone - teachers, secretaries, custodians, bus drivers - everyone who had a stake in our district and was being mistreated.

All of these tensions came to a head during the bargaining period of 2013-2014. The former leadership team, lead by Superintendent Dr. Barbara Fowler began its exodus at the end of the school year, and one by one, the old guard left the building. Mr. Jason Witt, former Assistant Superintendent of Human Resources, resigned shortly after, paving the way for one Dr. Jordan Harris to replace him in 2015.

Jordan Harris moved into this new position only two months ago, and when I spoke with him in late September, he had only been on the job for five weeks. Meanwhile, nearly everything that Jordan does - through email, in the weekly newsletters - is done smoothly, as though there are few things he prioritizes more than presenting an professional and a dignified poise.

In the hope of finding out more about the man behind this fresh new image, I approached his secretary at central office with a request for an exclusive interview. My chances of getting to see him were none too good, it seemed, for Jordan has become increasingly occupied since taking on the task of righting the Human Resources ship. After only a two-hour wait, however, I got a reply directly from Jordan himself.

Not only did he welcome the opportunity for the interview, but he offered to come to my school and talk when it would be convenient for me. I thanked him for his willingness to meet with me, but said that since I was on paternity leave at the time, meeting at my school wouldn't be necessary. Starbucks, I wondered? No, but we agreed on a time to meet at his office. I brought the coffee to him, and before long we were talking freely, frankly, and more fully than any of his predecessors would have dreamed of doing.

HR divisions set a tone for the way employees are treated in an organization; they administer the programs that serve all employees of the district. As the new HR specialist, Jordan has a key position in a school district, and I'm happy to report that he seems more than capable of doing an amazing job in the years to come. His advice to me, in parting, was to "never discount the importance of relationships." Building trust, he emphasized was the key to success at any level within an organization. Whether I would one day become a building principal or

central office administrator, dealing with people in an open and honest way would be essential. With this as his credo, I knew I was dealing with someone who could be relied on.

As with many HR directors, Jordan's background was not in education, but rather in labor relations. He graduated from Michigan State on three occasions, earning his bachelors, masters, and jurist doctorate from the East Lansing University. In fact, on the day of our interview, all central office staffers were wearing their favorite team colors, in preparation for a tailgate lunch in the parking lot. Jordan was in charge of manning the grill. The building felt more like the headquarters of ESPN, and I half expected to see our high school mascots roaming the halls.

I learned that his career path had taken him through a myriad of positions before becoming involved in our public school system. He had worked as a field examiner for a private practice, and done stints of legal activities in the manufacturing realm. He worked as a labor lawyer for one of the biggest firms in Michigan, and eventually found his way into educational law through Collins and Blaha, PC, which is one of a few full service law firms in Southeastern Michigan that represents public school districts, academies, community colleges, and ISDs. After that, he went to work for the Michigan Education Association, ironically bargaining and negotiating contracts for unions from the opposite side of the table from where he now sits. All of these experiences give him the practical understanding of the applicable laws, and the experience to make the right decisions for the employees of Troy.

We talked of many things during our interview, including some of the nuts and bolts of the HR position, but there were a few key things that stuck with me from our talk. First, he spoke of the change in philosophy that had taken place when he took over the position. Formerly, the department had been known as Human Resources. He told me, however, of our new superintendent's vision for the district. Dr. Machesky, he said, was a firm believer in viewing the job of the HR department as being in the business of human relations, rather than resources. Using a term like resources makes it sound like all the workers are simply human capital to be moved around where needed. Instead, they rebranded the office to be the department of employee services. "What does this mean, exactly?" I asked Jordan. "Check your email." he told me. "Every email that we send out now has the tag line at the end of it that typifies our beliefs." It reads, "Central Office is dedicated to providing outstanding professional service to support teaching and learning for the OneTroy community." That can mean whatever we need it to mean.

He clued me into the philosophy behind all of the newly coined OneTroy adages and phrases. "Those aren't just words to us. We worked hard as a team to decide on them." He told me that for weeks, different variations on a similar theme were posted around the central office building. They mulled them over, debated about the phrasing, and ultimately voted on the one that best captured the new customer-oriented service model they were going for. "A lot of what we're doing now comes from the Disney Institute's 'Be Our Guest' book - *Perfecting the Art of*

Customer Service. With the name change from human resources to employee services, their goal is to exceed all expectations rather than simply satisfying them. It made sense now why Jordan himself had replied to my request for an interview... it's about going above and beyond what would merely satisfy.

A poignant example of this came from when he was first considering taking this job. He had heard about Dr. Machesky's enthusiasm for being visible and being seen within the community. Every teacher in Troy had felt this change in climate when Rich first came to power. He was actually visible and could be found within the schools - from pre-K through 12th grade. He took a page out of Franklin Covey's playbook and made it a Wildly Important Goal for his central leadership team. Rich set a minimum number of visits to the schools for every member of his cabinet to make every week, and they reported out on whether or not they had met this goal at their weekly cabinet meetings.

"No one wanted to be the one to not make the goal" Jordan said, and he found himself questioning the authenticity of the practice. "Is this guy for real?" he wondered to himself about Dr. Machesky. But he soon found out that he was absolutely as good as his word. "Rich is masterful at taking what has worked in the business world and applying it to the public sector. As a central office team, we now have two WIGs... visibility and collaboration. We talked at length about this latter goal. To make collaboration a goal is an interesting choice in leadership styles. There are a lot of decisions that get made on a daily basis, and at times it may be easier and faster to simply make decisions on your own. He told me that part of our leadership team's new strategy is to ask the question, "Should I make this decision on my own?" Even if the answer to "can I?" is yes, the goal is to think about who else should be involved. When more heads are reviewing the situation, you get better decisions, more buy-in, and better outcomes.

Another new philosophy that had come in with the new regime was the OneTroy slogan. It was everywhere- on folders, coffee mugs, business cards, email signatures, and website. Jordan was the first one to point out to me that this had actually been "borrowed" from the OneFord movement. According to their website, the OneFord plan aligns their efforts toward a common definition of success: having One Team, One Plan and One Goal for an exciting, viable Ford that delivers profitable growth for all. Troy School District is also committed to excellence, and has recently been in the process of refining its focus and plan to set the standard for excellence in education.

Ford, I found, wasn't the only car company whose strategies we had been borrowing from, but also the Six Sigma system from Toyota, which focuses on eliminating waste. We talked about how one of his newly acquired jobs was to find ways to eliminate waste within our district. He compared making this change in the way things get done to steering the Titanic... you can't just turn things around over night. One example of this that he gave was our district's storage warehouse. It is a massive building called "Rankin" which, by the way he described it, looks like the warehouse in the *Raiders of the Lost Ark*, with aisle after aisle of textbooks wrapped in

cellophane, furniture, and toilet paper piled as high as the ceiling. “It’s an enormous amount of waste,” he said. He explained that he would like to see the district move towards more on demand ordering, so as to eliminate the need for so much capital locked up in storage.

Between talk of one Troy, six sigma, the eight wastes, and the four disciplines of execution, I felt like it was a challenging story problem from my fourth grade math curriculum. But I got the sense that there are some definite positive steps that are being taken in order to move our district in the right direction. I was amazed at how many aspects of the operations of our school district he as assistant superintendent of employee services has his finger on the pulse of. I told him it seemed like he had a lot of plates spinning at once, and the look he gave me made it seem like even his head was spinning at the complexity of the position. Human resources certainly seems like an exciting area to go into, as your day to day life would never allow for a dull moment. Whether it be flipping burgers on a grill or making a million dollar hiring decision, the HR specialist plays an essential roll to any district.