

# Lessons From the Trenches: HR War Stories

MANAGEMENT CONNECTION



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Many HR professionals have probably uttered the words, “I could write a book,” at some time during their careers. Working in Human Resources exposes us to a vast array of interesting and often unbelievable situations that we wish we could somehow share with others. One member of our team who also spent over 40 years in the HR trenches at member organizations did just that. Kevin Breese recently wrote the book, *Human Resources War Stories: In the Trenches* and shared highlights at a recent event. A diverse group of senior executives, many in HR, engaged in a lively discussion around some of his insights.

You may be thinking, *I’m a nutrition and foodservice professional, not an HR professional, what does this topic have to do with me?* The truth is, as the manager or director of a foodservice department, you wear many hats. You’re faced with various human resources issues on a daily basis, although you might not identify them as HR issues at first glance. You’re focused on getting meals to hungry clients!

But take a closer look and you’ll realize HR challenges crop up all day long. You might not loop your HR manager into the conversation each day, but HR is a very

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real part of your job. Your cook calls in sick and you need to rework the schedule. Your employees are not using gloves properly when prepping food and you realize it's time for an in-service program. Your staff seems disengaged and needs a motivational pep talk. All of these types of activities focus on your human resources—your staff.

But back to the lively discussion I referenced earlier. Below are a few of the takeaways.

### LEARN THE BUSINESS YOU'RE IN

If you are going to add value to an organization and be a true partner to the leadership team, you need to get to know as much as possible about the organization you're working for. This doesn't just apply to the people side, but also means learning about the products, services, financials, competition, etc. There are many ways to gain this knowledge, and it is an ongoing process throughout your tenure.

Taking a deep dive into your organization's mission, vision, and values will help you identify company priorities. Understanding the organization's balance sheet and overall financial

picture may prove useful as you budget for your own department. Identifying your competitors and learning about the unique types of services they're providing clients is also important. Keeping up with the Joneses isn't always a bad thing! Use your "intel" on competitors

to improve your own program. Visit their websites and learn what they're up to, and see whether their programs and services spark any ideas. There's nothing wrong with gaining inspiration from others to enhance your own dining program. If their practices were top secret, they wouldn't be using social media to spread the word.

These practices of thinking outside your own dietary services department not only benefit your employer, they also provide value to you. Whether you're being considered for a promotion within your company or wanting to take your skills

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elsewhere, expanding your overall knowledge base is never a bad thing. Industry knowledge helps you gain perspective and prevents narrow-minded thinking.

### TAKE RISKS AND LEARN FROM YOUR MISTAKES

HR professionals are not often thought of as risk takers, especially if they are primarily focused on the tactical part of their jobs. To experience advancement and growth, you need to take some chances and expand your horizons. Breese talked about a period in his career where he took on a management

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### HR RESOURCE

*Human Resources War Stories: In the Trenches* by Kevin M. Breese.

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job with profit and loss responsibility that forced him out of his comfort zone, but taught him many lessons in dealing with operations teams in his subsequent roles. While he made several mistakes along the way, he was willing to take ownership and move forward with increased confidence.

We've all heard about how many elections Abraham Lincoln lost before ultimately achieving the presidency. Or how many times Thomas Edison tried to invent a light bulb until he eventually succeeded in illuminating the world. These are obviously dramatic examples, but they're symbolic of stick-to-itiveness. The reality is you're going to have missteps along the way. But you'll learn as much—or more—from your mistakes as from your successes. Get back on the horse!

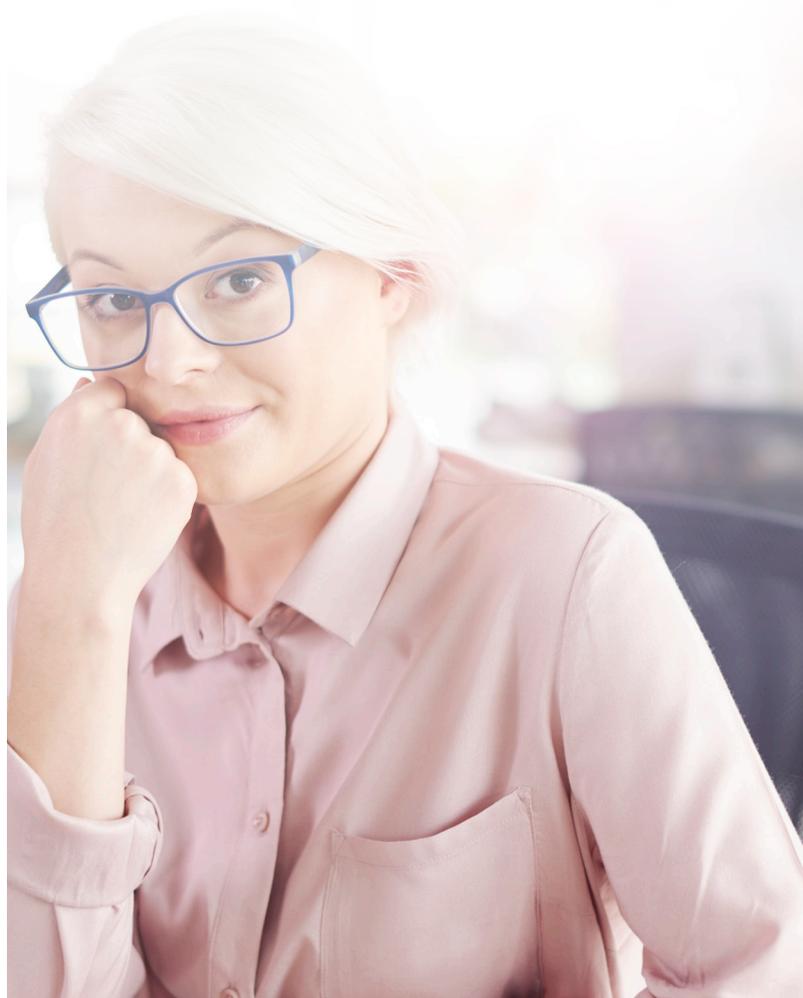
Perhaps it's instituting more flexible scheduling for your staff. Or maybe it's tightening up the dress code of your employees. Or possibly requiring more staff in-services throughout the year. If you implement changes like these and they fail or fall flat for whatever reason, you can reassess the policy or practice, and can “undo” what you've done or retool your

practices for success. Don't be afraid to go out on a limb if you believe in what you're doing.

### BE A ROLE MODEL

HR professionals are in a unique position to interact with and influence both management and employees. As keepers of the culture, trusted HR professionals do both extremely well by utilizing effective communication techniques. This power to impact the organization and its people should never be taken lightly. Serving as a role model for others comes with a great deal of responsibility, and demonstrating a consistent set of values is critical to success.

Echoing some earlier advice, know the mission, vision, and values of your organization. And then model behavior that reflects those principles. Be ethical and beyond reproach in all you do. If you want your team to behave ethically—and we all do—then you must model that behavior. Treat others with respect and never talk behind their back. Don't play favorites. Demonstrate compassion to each of your team members. And likewise, demonstrate compassion to your patients and residents. Remember



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that your staff is watching you and following your lead. Walk the talk!

### IT'S ALL ABOUT PEOPLE

In the book's preface, Breese writes, “The hardest part of being successful is the people factor, that is, the interactions and communications that occur on a frequent basis between human beings.” That, in my

experience, is also where the magic happens. HR is truly a fascinating and fulfilling profession made possible by the intriguing and challenging people we work with along the way.

Treat people with dignity and respect, and you're likely to see those behaviors in your team members. **E**

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- As a nutrition and foodservice professional, what does Human Resources have to do with you?
  - HR has little to do with you
  - You wear many hats and must often handle HR issues within your department
  - Every HR issue is always best tackled by the HR manager
- Which of the following is *not* a Human Resources issue?
  - The tomatoes in the lunch salad were anemic-looking
  - The foodservice staff needs further training on hand-washing techniques
  - The foodservice team could use a pep talk to improve their attitudes
- Which of these is *not* a takeaway from Kevin Breese's book?
  - Learn the business you're in
  - Be a role model
  - Don't let employees walk all over you
- Learning the business you're in means:
  - Learning about the organization's products and services
  - Learning about the financials and competition
  - All of the above
- Learning what your competitors are up to through word of mouth or social media
  - Isn't ethical because their programs may be trademarked
  - Is a good idea and helps you gain industry perspective
  - Is illegal
- Taking calculated risks and learning from mistakes:
  - Helps you gain confidence and learn
  - Lands you in hot water more often than not
  - It's never OK to engage in risky decision-making
- Being a role model in your workplace means
  - Understanding your organization's mission, vision, and values and modeling appropriate behavior
  - Dressing nicer than your team members
  - Coming in early and leaving late every day

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