



# Court Employees: Investing in Your Human Capital

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*How can a court invest in human capital? Here is an administrative judge's answer to that question.*

It is no secret that a kind word can work wonders. Nothing will ease the tensions of a bad day better than having someone come up to you and say, "Thank you for what you did. It really meant a lot to me." It takes almost no effort to say something nice, and the payoffs can be incalculable. Consider a kind word as a solid investment of your time.

I speak from experience because as the administrative judge for the Cuyahoga County Common Pleas Court in Cleveland, I manage a staff of more than 500 people.

We are, by far, the largest court in Ohio and one of the largest in the nation. Our staff serves 34 elected judges, each with dockets that have more than 1,000 cases.

Our court is more than just our judges. To operate such a huge legal machine, it takes buy-in from every single employee. A personal bailiff is no more critical than a judicial secretary. A drug lab technician is every bit as important as a probation officer. Without our IT employees, our court would be at a standstill. Our employees are our human capital. We need to invest wisely.

To be fully engaged in their jobs, I believe every employee needs to feel valued and empowered, and that effort begins at the highest level. Employee satisfaction and involvement is one of the critical components of my job, and I have tried to focus at least a small bit of time on each individual.



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In my five years as administrative judge, our court has hired more than 200 new employees. That creates huge change, and huge opportunity. When new employees arrive for their first week on the job, I spend a few minutes one-on-one with each of them to welcome them to our team. I want to hear their expectations for their personal career growth and the court. Doing so gives me a better perspective as an administrator, and it is a simple, but valuable, investment in human capital.

Being administrative judge allows me to develop programs designed to build a better sense of camaraderie among all our employees. Many of our departments work somewhat independently and that can lead to a sense of isolation, which is not a recipe for success.

Each January, I schedule meetings with every department in the court. We spend about half an hour together, and I challenge our employees with an idea or theme for the year ahead. In 2016 it was “Servant Leadership,” and we talked about the citizens we serve as a court. We were “All-In” in 2017 following the Cleveland Cavaliers’ NBA Championship. I promoted “Action Leadership/Leadership in Action” in 2018, encouraging our employees take leading roles both in and out of the court.

In 2019 I discussed seeking “Balance” in our lives. We can never truly achieve a perfect balance between our work and personal lives, so I shared with them the lessons I have learned after reading several books on the subject. I encouraged everyone to look at every moment of every day. Live in those moments and balance will find you but be willing to take risks. As Theodore Roosevelt famously said, “It is hard to fail, but it is worse never to have tried to succeed.”

The court also arranges a small token of appreciation for each employee at these meetings. It always features the court’s seal, and is something that they can use while on the job. We have provided thermal mugs, coasters made from recycled car tires, stress balls, mouse pads, and, this year, a desktop cell-phone holder. None of these items have been extremely expensive, but I cannot even begin to calculate the value of providing something tangible to our employees. It is a fun and practical investment in our human capital.

Another way our court has invested in its human capital is by hosting events in which the staff can participate. Our fifth annual “Justice Fore All” September golf outing will take place this year. Financially, it is a break-even event, because the goal is camaraderie. We charge only enough to cover the greens fees and food, but people can gather outside of the courthouse, be themselves, and get to know their colleagues a little better. In December, we also host an annual holiday party at a nearby restaurant. We have a chili cook-off to benefit the local food bank in February, and a corned beef sandwich lunch for St. Patrick’s Day. Last fall, our judges hosted an ice cream social as a thank you to our employees.

During the summer, the court collaborates with the Downtown Cleveland Alliance to bring food trucks to the court for lunch on Mondays. We’ve dubbed it “Memorial Mondays.”

In addition to the great cuisine, the event is filled with live music and a chance for people to be outside and enjoy some sunshine. What started as something positive for jurors has evolved into a popular event for people who work downtown.



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Every other Wednesday (weather allowing), we host “Justice Fur All,” in which the Cleveland Animal Protective League brings in dogs and kittens that are available for adoption. You want to draw a crowd? Have two puppies available for some “pet therapy,” and I guarantee people will stop by.

There are other employee-outreach programs, but these represent how we try to keep our workers engaged.

While engagement is important, even more critical is having an open-door policy. I encourage every employee to stop by my chambers if something is bothering them or if they have a suggestion. One of the worst things a leader can do is to avoid constructive criticism. As a judge, I look at things differently than a courtroom assistant or a staff attorney might. Every idea should be given careful thought. One of my favorite suggestions was that the court install a roof pool and tiki bar. Ultimately, I rejected that idea, but not without serious consideration.

An open-door policy is great, but not everyone is going to feel comfortable going to “the boss” with a concern. Sometimes they want to remain anonymous, which is perfectly understandable. That is why we installed a suggestion box in 2014. Well, not quite a suggestion box, but a suggestion wheel.

In the days before computer databases, jurors were chosen when their names were pulled from a large, rotating wheel that is not too far removed a bingo hall drum. There are several of these wheels in our courthouse, including a spectacularly ornate wooden wheel from 1931 on display on our first floor.

An employee suggested that we use a wheel from the 1970s and repurpose it for suggestions. A lock was installed on the wheel’s door, and I have the only key. Every Friday, I check the wheel and usually pull out a few slips of carefully folded paper. As you might imagine, not every anonymous suggestion is friendly, but several policy changes have come from these slips of paper. And, yes, the tiki bar idea did come from the suggestion wheel.

If you look back on the efforts I have laid out, the monetary expenditure is minimal. The annual employee gift is usually under \$1,000 total. The golf outing and holiday party are funded through ticket sales and employee Dress Down Fridays; employees can dress casually on those days, but we collect a small fee that goes into a “Fun Account” for court functions. We even donate to local charities with those funds.

Which brings me back around to the beginning and the idea of kind words. Employee events are great, but they do not speak directly to the person. Take a moment in the elevator to say good morning, ask about a person’s day, and compliment a cool pair of shoes. When you are walking down the hall, have your phone in your pocket and make eye contact with people you pass. Tell them to “have a great day.”

When someone goes above and beyond the call of duty, give them a shout out. Stop by their office or cubicle and tell them what a good job they did. Make sure they feel appreciated and that you know about their efforts.

*It does not cost much to invest in your human capital, but your efforts and gestures will pay dividends. If someone has ever said something kind to you, then you know exactly what I mean.*

*It is always going to be the right investment to make.*