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Where Leadership Begins

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Throw Out the Playbook



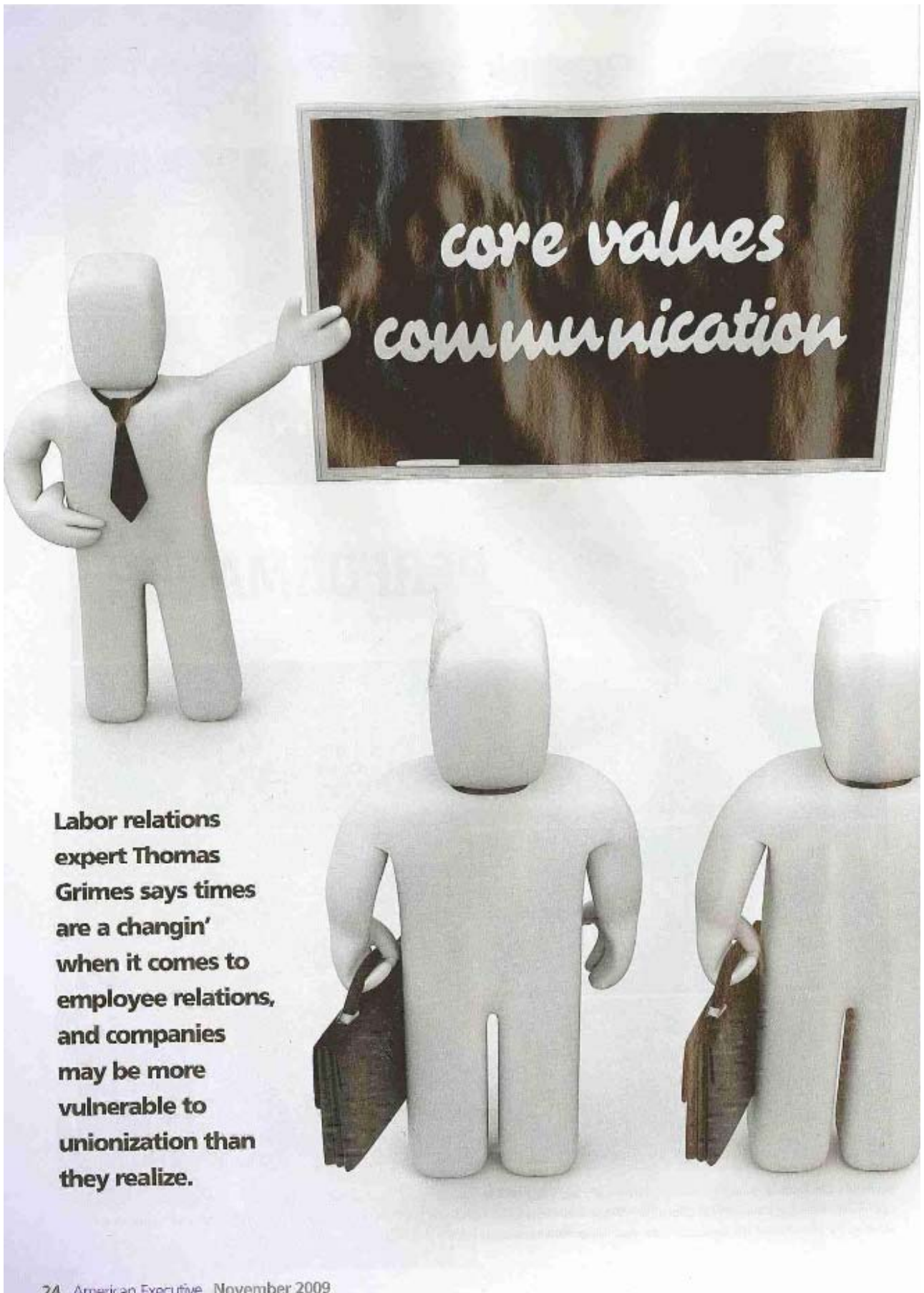
Dave Batt's decision not to play by the standard marketing rules paid off in a big way for his knowledge-sharing software company.



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Labor relations expert Thomas Grimes says times are a changin' when it comes to employee relations, and companies may be more vulnerable to unionization than they realize.

Shift Change

Regardless of the outcome of EFCA or other labor reforms, the current political and social environment is sure to bring significant change to traditional labor/employee relations. We see many executives becoming proactive in their anti-reform lobbying efforts, but far fewer are sufficiently prepared when it comes to internal employee relations and labor preparedness efforts.

Employer action is especially important today because organized labor has changed its organizing strategy. Unions realize that organizing employers is easier than organizing employees. Joe Crump, a UFCW official said it best: "Employees are complex and unpredictable. Employers are simple and predictable. Organize employers, not employees."

The employer-focused strategy is gaining ground, as demonstrated by the increased level of negative business and corporate campaigns. Unions know that attacking employers can successfully force capitulation to "card check" or other demands and encourage employees to sign union authorization cards at the same time.

Public sentiment, customer reactions, real or false accusations, charges, and complaints against an employer add an escalating dimension to organizing. Regardless of the size of your company, the cost to defend your company may be high and may force undesirable decisions and outcomes—few employers are not vulnerable to this organizing strategy. Before reaching that point, executives should assess vulnerability factors that can make them a target and make preparedness a priority.

Begin by looking at policies, programs, and practices directly related to supervisory status, competitiveness in compensation,

solicitation/distribution, problem resolution, e-mail/Internet use, and similar subjects to minimize issues and directly affect potential internal and external organizing efforts.

Vulnerability today is much broader than the traditional organizing issues of the past. Employers need a broad, proactive, and ongoing labor-preparedness approach. We refer to these expanded factors as the seven Cs: core values, communication, change, consistency, compensation, compliance, and corporate reputation.

The first C: core values

Core values guide and define your company's identity. They include a basic mission statement and set of values regarding employee relations and can include operations, quality, safety, customers, shareholders, business and personal ethics, as well as other subjects that dictate actions and behaviors essential to your company.

Guiding principles to assist management and employees in the application of these values can (and should) be developed. Executives need to bear in mind that the presentation, education, understanding, and reinforcement of core values and guiding principles require an ongoing effort from employers and employees. At a minimum, employee relations core values should include statements that the company:

- Respects and follows the law regarding an employee's rights
- Commits to a positive, direct relationship with employees
- Places high importance on management and employee education and involvement
- Is pro-employee and pro-company (not anti-union), focusing on "us" as the best way to achieve shared goals

When your employees feel that you are listening and responsive, your defense against third-party organizing efforts is strengthened. However, identifying your vulnerabilities on your own is not always easy.

Without stated core values, a vacuum exists that can be easily filled with negative perceptions by an organizing effort, resulting in divisions among employees who are not sure where they stand, managers and supervisors who are inconsistent in their actions, and an employer caught without the kind of positive relationships that can avoid or minimize the attack. Clearly stated and practiced employee relations core values create a track record and prevent the vacuum.

The second C: communication

Communication is an ongoing, interactive process, not a passive activity involving memos, e-mails, posted notices, or handbooks. Some subjects are appropriate for these communication vehicles, but certain subjects produce the desired results only when actively managed. This involves obtaining and sharing valuable knowledge about the company and its stakeholders.

Key communication initiatives include feedback collection, analysis, and follow-up actions to achieve success. Follow-up is a key initiative since employee input without results creates the perception that leaders are "all talk and no walk."

Examples of this process include individual or small-group interactions between employees and management, regular staff meetings, leadership roundtables, surveys and audits, problem identification and resolution programs, and a variety of other two-way communication vehicles.

When your employees feel that you are listening and responsive, your defense against third-party organizing efforts is strengthened. However, identifying your vulnerabilities on your own is not always easy. No one willingly puts themselves at risk, so an outside opinion can help you avoid pitfalls that other companies have experienced.

When executives honestly assess their vulnerabilities and take advantage of the seven Cs (particularly core values and communication), they are rewarded with involvement, awareness, participation, and a feeling of ownership among all stakeholders. The open dialog about and application of core values is a process that begins during the hiring process and does not end until an employee is released from employment. ■

Thomas Grimes is senior vice president and a founding partner of The Mickus Group (www.mickusgroup.com). With an international client base ranging from entrepreneurial to Fortune 100 companies in the manufacturing, healthcare, retail, distribution, higher education, telecommunications, and other industries, The Mickus Group builds positive employee relations and helps clients learn to manage their organizations independently.

