

Blog Post

Labor Day – More than just Barbecues and Parades

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By Amy Moor Gaylord

As summer winds down, employers and employees alike look forward to a leisurely three-day weekend typically spent with family and friends, enjoying the remaining days of summer warmth, perhaps readying kids to go back to school or college. Except this Labor Day will likely be anything but typical. With crowded activities such as parades and fireworks displays canceled due to social distancing precautions, we may find ourselves spending the weekend hanging out in our backyards with our families, taking a walk, hike, or bike ride, or maybe reading or binging some new TV series. And with many school reopening plans put on hold or even scrapped altogether, many of us are feeling anxiety at the prospect of another semester of virtual learning or scrambling to find childcare. But, just because this holiday may feel different, like much of this year, doesn't mean there isn't anything to celebrate on Monday, September 7.

Where Did Labor Day Come From?

The idea of a “workingmen’s holiday,” celebrated on the first Monday in September, caught on in the late 1800’s in cities such as New York and Chicago, and many states passed legislation recognizing it. Congress legalized the holiday 12 years later, following a watershed moment in American labor history. On May 11, 1894, employees of the Pullman Palace Car Company in Chicago went on strike to

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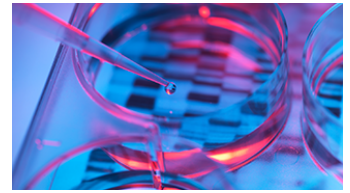
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protest wage cuts and the firing of union representatives. On June 26, the American Railroad Union called for a boycott of all Pullman railway cars, crippling railroad traffic nationwide. To break the Pullman strike, the federal government dispatched troops to Chicago, unleashing a wave of riots that resulted in the deaths of more than a dozen workers.

In the wake of this massive unrest and in an attempt to repair ties with American workers, Congress passed an act making Labor Day a legal holiday in the District of Columbia and the territories. On June 28, 1894, President Grover Cleveland signed it into law.

Why Should We Celebrate this Year?

The struggles of this year have served to remind us of the importance of those who show up to work each day, whether they are in the workplace or working remotely. Employers have been forced to pivot, to be creative and resourceful in redesigning job functions, reallocating resources, and implementing new technologies that allow employees to perform their jobs. While today's workplace looks very different from that of the late 1800's – or even from that of March 2020 – some things remain very much the same. Without our employees, from senior management to our newest hire, we could not get work done, could not make our products, could not serve our customers.

On this Labor Day, given the challenges employers and employees have faced over the past six months, we have the opportunity to make sure our employees feel engaged, appreciated, and supported. Research shows time and again that engaged employees are happier, more productive, more creative, and more efficient. How can employers celebrate our employees this Labor Day in our “new normal” workplace?

In 2017, *Glassdoor for Employers* published an article, based on employee and employer surveys, on ways for employers to celebrate Labor Day and honor their employees in a way designed to improve employee engagement, reduce turnover, and boost job satisfaction. These suggestions remain relevant, but employers must find new ways to implement these celebration ideas in a pandemic workplace.

1. Show gratitude.

Everyone likes to be thanked, appreciated. Especially now, when employees at all levels are expected to go above and beyond – do their jobs, oversee their children’s education, be caregivers, and apparently, if social media is to be believed, engage in master level baking and cake decorating while still maintaining a professional athlete’s rigorous workout schedule. Knowing that your employer sees and appreciates all that you are doing can be a powerful gesture for an employee. Maybe a shout out email to the department about an employee’s success in landing a new client or project. A simple phone call to say thank you and how are you doing. In this day and age of texts and social media happy birthdays, actually picking up the phone and engaging in an honest, thankful conversation can be a powerful gesture.

Consider showing thankfulness through other gestures as well. We cannot all sit down and have an employee appreciation luncheon together but could we designate a day to order lunch for everyone and have it delivered to their house? It might be a welcome gesture for employees tired of eating the same old things in their fridge. We know of one employer who sent a “care package” of masks and hand sanitizer to every employee for the employee and all of their family members. Be creative in your gestures of thankfulness

2. Be present and mindful.

Largely gone are the days of dropping into a someone's office to chat with them. But just because we may not be able to talk to our coworkers in person, and that may vary according to the setup of your workplace, your industry, and the restrictions in your area, does not mean that we stop listening. Being there to actually listen to our employees' concerns, fears, hopes, ambitions, ideas.

Make sure all employees have ways to connect and be heard. Videoconferencing is a powerful tool we can use. But video-conference fatigue can be real so sometime a good old-fashioned phone call might be the best way to listen. Offer employees multiple avenues of communication. Where appropriate, and taking all recommended precautions, in person meetings may be possible. And be mindful of employees working from home overworking themselves. The lines between workplace and home have become so blurry that some employees may have a hard time stepping away from their computers, work email, and phones leading to burnout and fatigue.

3. Consider rethinking how you reward employees.

According to the *Glassdoor* article, about 3 in 5 candidates reported that benefits and perks were among their top considerations when considering whether to accept a job offer. And benefits played an even more significant role when it came to employee retention.

Now is the time to rethink the benefits you offer to employees. Do they mesh with employees' current work situation and needs? Employees are justifiably concerned about their family's health and safety. How competitive is your health insurance plan? Does it include things like mental health coverage? Various types of leave are required by state and federal law but offering additional flexibility and paid leave options may help attract and retain top performing employees. And what better time than

Labor Day to think about offering more flexible health and leave options?

Also consider expanding your Employee Assistance Program. Employees may be having feelings of loneliness and isolation when they are not surrounded by colleagues every day. It is important to make them feel supported, recognized, and to know that they have resources they can call upon.

4. Make sure new employees know how welcome they are.

According to the *Glassdoor* article, 71% of job seekers reported that the onboarding experience had the power to influence their decision to stay with a company. That confirms the widely held belief that first impressions are hard to change. So, best foot forward, even during a pandemic.

Many of the ways we used to welcome new hires, such as taking them out for lunch or coffee or walking them around the office to introduce them to new colleagues, simply aren't feasible today. We need to look for creative ways for new employees to interact with their coworkers. Perhaps host a virtual game or trivia night so that new employees can introduce themselves. Make sure new employees are aware of different clubs, groups, or activities within the company. Book club? Virtual yoga class? Affinity groups? Have existing employees reach out to new employees to encourage their participation. Perhaps designate all new hires with a "liaison" to help get them acclimated and familiar with all your workplace has to offer. The point is to make them feel welcome and wanted, even if we cannot be there in person to shake their hand and show them to their office.

5. Engage, engage, engage!

At the end of the day, employees who are engaged – those who are involved in, enthusiastic about and committed to their work and workplace – are

employees who will be productive, efficient, high performing, and satisfied. But how do we go about engaging employees? Especially when many of us are working from home or having limited social interactions in the workplace?

Again, be mindful and deliberate. Encourage open communication and feedback, both positive and negative. Sometimes the best ideas can come from criticism well taken and applied. Now, more ever, we need to know what our employees are thinking. We need to know if they are doing okay working from home or do they feel safe coming into our workplace. Do they need more tools or resources to be able to effectively work from home? Do they have ideas about how to make the workplace safer and healthier for everyone? Thoughts about managing work with family responsibilities? Engaging with employees on these issues is something all employers should do, pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic, and a way to truly celebrate employees' contributions on this Labor Day.

Conclusion

However you choose to celebrate Labor Day, take some time to think about how you can celebrate your employees and have a safe and healthy holiday. If you need assistance implementing any of the ideas discussed above such as new benefit plans or an employee engagement program for your workforce, contact your Akerman attorney.

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