

PIVOT

JUNE 2024

A portrait of Sharon Lechter, a woman with long, straight blonde hair and blue eyes. She is wearing a bright pink blazer over a black top and a dark pearl necklace. She is sitting in a white, patterned chair and has her right hand resting against her face, with her index finger pointing upwards. The background is a softly blurred indoor setting.

**SHARON
LECHTER**

A Legacy of Creating Legacies

BUILDING CORPORATE CULTURES THAT WORK



KAREN A. YOUNG

Chris O'Byrne

What was a defining moment in your life that helped shape who you are today?

Karen Young

It was in my second semester of freshman year in college. I had changed from a music major to a business major because I was miserable as a music major. I took

an organizational psychology class as an elective, and the lightbulb went off. From that moment, I knew that I wanted to do something with work and time management. In essence, it's come down to being truly focused on work-life balance. That's what led me to my career. I was blessed that second semester of freshman year; I discovered what I wanted to do.

Chris O'Byrne

What made you choose HR?

Karen Young

Well, back in the Dark Ages, when I graduated, it was personnel. And there was no such thing as a personnel major. I did the whole business administration and psychology double-major thing. I want to say it was the late '80s

when it switched over to human resources. I just really liked the interaction and the thinking of having the processes work efficiently. How do we get the most out of the people to do the processes?

And then how are we good to the people so we can get more processes out of them? Take a look at the entire structure and analysis of a good workplace. It's funny. Who knew it would become such a big deal today?

My senior thesis in undergraduate was about corporate cultures. That's back when there were four corporate cultures. There was Big Blue with IBM. I don't remember the names of the other ones. But I've become focused on creating cultures where employees *want* to come to work every day. It's funny how it all ended up tying in.

Chris O'Byrne

Did the corporate culture movement come from within the HR community originally?

Karen Young

It did because HR supports the policies and procedures, so that sets the environment—what is and isn't acceptable in the workplace—and establishes accountability. It comes from leadership to determine this is the direction we want to go. Is this the image we want to

present? I'll use IBM from back in the days when IBM was the apple of our earlier generation.

The big deal was if you were in IBM, in a suit, in a tie, and presented this very corporate image when you went out because it was intended to relay expertise, perfection, and analysis. It was about the image you want to reflect upon the work the company did. To have those things in place, you have to have solid policies and procedures to support that. On the other side of the spectrum, you can't have a policy and procedure with a dress code that requires a suit and tie when you want to have a relaxed camaraderie Google-type environment.

So, the policy has to match the culture, and the culture has to know that they have to work together.

Chris O'Byrne

Have you seen a significant workplace for the workers and increased awareness around culture?

Karen Young

I think that's a mixed bag. The optimist in me wants to say that in the midst of COVID, a lot of our clients had a very strict culture and environment and struggled with the new reality. They struggled with allowing people

to work from home. They were the ones questioning, "How do I know if they're working? They're supposed to work eight to five, but they're putting their child down for a nap." So they're not at their desk. Oh my heavens, this is the end of the world!

Those organizations really struggled to get through COVID. Our clients have thankfully survived, and they've made the switch, but I still hear, "Karen, how do I know they're working?" or "I really don't believe they have to come to work to be efficient." HR Resolutions, we've learned to become quite efficient. We haven't been in an office building since 2018, which was when I sold it. We are tremendously efficient, and I have seen how much work we get done.

Much of that is because our culture is "We don't care when you get the work done as long as the client is happy and the work is getting done." I had an employee ask my permission to go to her child's St. Patrick's Day parade at daycare. I'm like, "First of all, of course. Secondly, you're fired if you ever ask me to do something like that again. Now go. Please, go." It was the biggest shift I've seen regarding having much more relaxed environments.

I always complain that when I have to go out to a client, I have to wear "big girl" clothes. I have committed to model that for my staff. I upped my dress game

a little this year. I'm ready at a moment's notice to go out and visit a client. But we don't need to do that to do good work. That's the most important thing many companies have learned: You don't need to wear a suit and tie to be a successful salesperson. You don't have to wear a three-piece suit. Women don't have to be in a dress to sell Mary Kay anymore. That was a massive culture change. And with all due respect to any Mary Kay people who may be listening, it was huge when they changed over to being allowed to wear dress pants.

The quality-quantity effort you put into your work doesn't have anything to do with your clothes. Now, if you are client and customer-facing, that's one thing since you're representing the culture of the company. So things have, I believe, improved. I also believe that employers are more open-minded to stopping and thinking, *What do I need to do to keep my employees engaged and happy?*

So I say that, and then I just got a newsletter today from Gallup that says employee engagement is at an eleven-year low, so maybe I'm just living in my happy little bubble that everybody at HRR is thrilled, and we love what we do.

In reality, I don't think culture is the first thing a majority of employers think about or embrace, but I think the challenge

is that the employers who didn't get onto this bus need to think about what their employees need. They're pulling the whole thing down when they need to stop and look.

One of the blogs I keep threatening—promising—to write is that its culture, not cash. People leave their managers. We know that. Well, people are going to leave a toxic culture for 10 cents and 25 cents more.

And on an exit interview, it's very simple to say, "I got more money." It's very easy to say that. It's very hard to say, "The environment here is awful, and I wish you all the best."

Our exit interviews always start with, "When did you start to look for a new job? What prompted that?" That's when we're able to dig down into the *real* reason people are leaving their jobs. If it's not just the manager, 99 out of 100 times, it's the culture: "They're not flexible with my work schedule," "They won't let me work at home," "I can't get a day off anytime I ask for one," and "I'm made to feel bad."

Chris O'Byrne

What made you shift from working within another company to starting your own?

Karen Young

I worked my way up through organizations, got up to where I

was a director, and reported to a senior vice president of HR. I worked in a big international corporate office with seven HR specialists reporting to me. Now I'm a Baby Boomer, so you'd think that's the world. Oh my gosh, I've arrived! But no, I was miserable. I missed the people part of HR.

I got to a point where I actually worked down in organizations but had that knowledge of how the corporate office works. I became disillusioned with corporate America and the employers I'd worked for and just decided to try it.

Our focus is on the small businesses that are too small to have an HR manager. Frankly, I've learned that they need HR support more than the big companies with layers of lawyers and regulations like Sarbanes-Oxley. They have global regulations that they have to follow.

It's the small guys like myself who started my company. I knew HR, but I didn't know the first thing about running a company, including IT, marketing, or sales. I'm finding that with the majority of our clients.

They know their product. They know their expertise. But when it comes to this finessing of dealing with the employee who has an illness out of nowhere or dealing with what we call "problem children," 20% of our workforce gives us 80% of our headaches.

These business owners who are experts in their fields can be completely thrown by how to deal with someone's behavior. Then they hear the fear-mongering from their friends and social media about the laws and regulations, and the Equal Opportunity Commission sued this company for hundreds of thousands of dollars.

So they become almost paralyzed in doing anything about these problem children because they're afraid. They don't know that they can. Now, we're not attorneys, but we help them realize that they've got options. Some of them aren't *people people*. They're manufacturers. They're focused on the process. They're not focused on quality. They're not focused on the people. So we help soften them up a little bit. We work with the employees to help them understand, "Hey, this is why you need to come in on time."

I know: Your boss has been harassing you about coming to work on time.

- A. That's not really harassment
- B. They're allowed to do it
- C. They need to do it

HR often gets bad eggs from both sides. Corporate is saying, "Oh, you're too employee friendly."

Employees are saying, "Oh, you work for the man. You work for the company."



HR says: HR works for the company, for the organization."

I always like to define it this way: If not for the organization, you wouldn't have a job. If it weren't for you, I wouldn't have a company. So, we need to work through this together. That's where I see HR's responsibilities. How do we get the two sides to work together?

Sometimes, I have to be on the side of the employer. I have to say, "You must come to work on time. We've had ten discussions about this. If you miss work again, you may lose your job." I have to have that conversation sometimes. Other times, I go to the employer and say, "You can't keep denying vacation time," for them to respond, "You can't roll it over. You can't do that."

Where in the law does it say I can't do that? They're right. In most states, they can, but that's where HR needs to then be the advocate for the employee. It's a very difficult line that we walk, and for some odd reason, I love it.

Chris O'Byrne

What are the biggest problems you usually see?

Karen Young

People are afraid to hold others accountable for a lot of reasons. Number one, when it comes right down to it, we don't want to hurt somebody's feelings. Even if it's somebody who doesn't like dealing with people, they don't want to hurt somebody's feelings by saying, "You did not meet my expectations."

It's hard. It's a lot easier just to fix the issue than to suggest a sit-down and talk about the issue again, to say, "I want to walk through this one more time with you."

Well, that takes more of my effort and energy to do that. So it's hard. We don't want to hurt their feelings. We're afraid to say anything because they might sue us. You know, maybe they don't look like us. They might sue us because I'm disciplining them, but coaching isn't disciplining. Coaching is coaching and mentoring. Our work is to help our managers, leaders, and

supervisors understand that they don't need discipline immediately. Go to coaching, go to mentoring.

The best line I ever heard was in marriage counseling. When I got married, my husband's daughters were 13 and 16. I learned that everybody wants to be understood. Everybody wants you to understand their position. So, if an employee has done something that I disagree with or isn't the HRR way, my first question is, can you help me understand?

I want to give them the opportunity. Maybe they found a better way. Have that conversation. Let me walk through it again, and then I'll ask you a couple of questions to recap what we've agreed to. I know I've explained it when I've done that because she repeated the expectation. At that point, if she doesn't meet it, I'm not doing her any favors by fixing it. I'm working with someone I'm mentoring right now, and I'm like, *You are not doing him any favors by letting him continue to get away with this.* He's probably not intentionally trying to get away with anything, but he clearly doesn't understand his responsibilities. By covering for him and fixing his mistakes, he won't improve. He's going to keep falling back on it. "Karen will fix it for me." Accountability has to be number one.

Chris O'Byrne

How do you help companies?

Karen Young

We go to service in a couple of different ways. The initial service when I started was literally "as needed." I don't talk about that too much when I'm meeting with prospects and new clients simply because it isn't doable on our side. It doesn't give them the ability to budget for HR. But it's the heart and soul of how HR Resolution started.

An example might be somebody who has an unemployment claim. They're not sure how to respond. They believe they should win. So our job is to help them present the business side of it to the unemployment office so that they have a better chance of winning the claim. Now, unemployment is just an oddball. Some days, it goes on the employer's side. On other days, it goes on the employee side. I haven't figured out what the magic answer is there. I don't know that there is one. They don't have that many issues throughout the year. They've got a smaller staff. Everything's in good control. It wouldn't make sense for them to invest any more in their HR because they know they have a resource available if and when they need it.

Now, if anything increases, if they start having more and more problems, they may bring us in on a larger engagement. But that's

okay. I want small businesses to get HR help without having to go to an attorney because you don't need them for everything.

Many companies assess the combined experience of all their staff. I've done that. But the important thing is we are all experienced. We all have worked in large companies, so we get it. The one thing we do understand a bit more than some of our peers and competitors is that our clients have businesses to run. There's an operational aspect to their challenges that we factor in. We're not just quoting, "Well, here's what the regulation says. So you need to do that." We're helping them figure it out without breaking the law. We walk away.

I walked away from a client who said, "I'm not going to do that." They knew perfectly well it was the law. We walked away. But give them their options because there are gray areas. It took me so long to learn that it's not all black and white because I came in through payroll, which is black and white. Payroll is payroll is payroll. There are things you have to meet for payroll. It took me a while to adapt to the gray. But I like to explain to our smaller clients that we work just like a large company's human resources department does.

We have an HR strategist, which would be your highest level, a chief human resource officer, or vice president of human

resources if we weren't a big company. I have a director of HR who's responsible for the bigger projects or problems that arise. We have HR managers responsible for the day-to-day work of our clients. We have an HR specialist who's responsible for the administration, the benefits administration, and unemployment claim filing. We bring an entire big-company HR department to our clients, but only the pieces and parts they need and when needed.

Chris O'Byrne

What is the ideal company for you to work with?

Karen Young

I worked with a strategist this year. So I'm an HR person, not a businessperson. I could define the ideal client. We are across all industries—professional services, manufacturing, construction, and professional services. We just crossed the realm.

Next, I looked at the company size. A third of our clients have 50–99 employees or 50+, a third have 21–49, and a third are less than 10. The sweet spot is 40–60 because then it does make sense for them to retain us as their HR department. Also, there's a fixed budget. We do the whole HR thing for them. Under those circumstances, I can show the return on investment based on whether they would have even

just a senior degree-certified HR professional. I can show them how much money they are saving and demonstrate the ROI for them for that 40–60 group.

But frankly, if I worked my brain a little harder, I could do the same with all of our clients, but that 40–60, I can absolutely, out of the gate, show them how they can get a big-time HR department for pennies on the dollar.

But we're not inexpensive. We're not the most expensive but not the least expensive.

Chris O'Byrne

Tell me about your book, *Sought After: How to Be Heard, Be Trusted, and Be Recognized for Your Expertise*.

Karen Young

Sure! That's my first leadership book. My publisher said it was the book I was born to write. I think the next one that's coming out is the one I was born to write. But *Sought After* was born when I walked off of my first national stage.

I'm a national speaker now. I regularly speak at the Society for Human Resource Manager's annual international conference. The first time I walked off the stage, I was like, *Oh my God, I have to do this again!* Then I started thinking, *Why are people paying me to talk? Why is my national association? Why is my room*

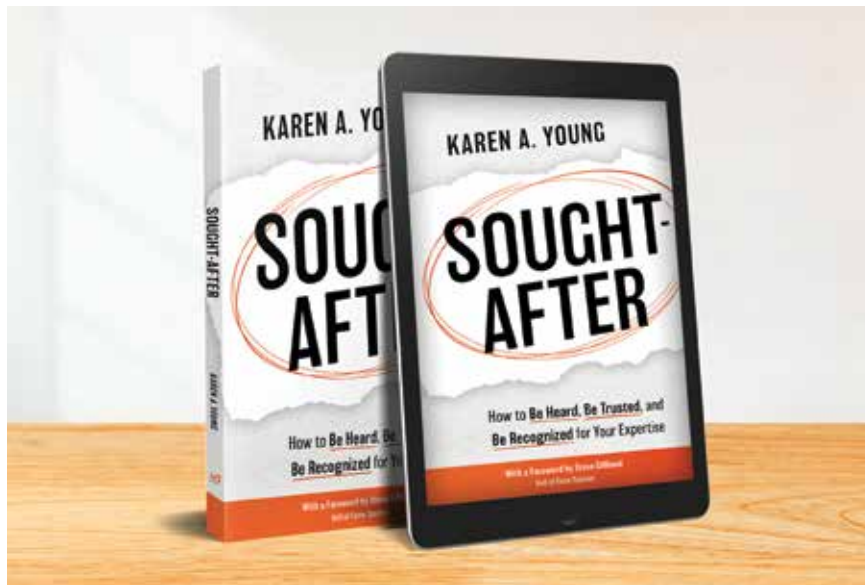
booked? Why are people being nice? Why are they coming? I'm a South-Central Pennsylvania girl. Why are people coming to hear me? I broke it down into four building blocks that I've theorized to become sought after. They're the ones that have worked for me.

The first one is to know your stuff. Well, I know human resources. I will put myself in a human resource bowl with anybody, and I'm going to run over them. I'm going to win.

The second is to know the business. And I don't just mean the profit and loss. I don't just mean the accounting part of the business. *Understand* the business. If I were working for a corporation, I would want to understand how we make money. How do we lose money? Where are we leaking money? I want to understand the operational aspects of the business because if I don't, my customers aren't going to trust me with the information I give.

I often hear that HR people are the Department of No. That hurts me when I hear that because we are the Department of Yes within reason. But we always factor in the operational piece. So, know your stuff. Know their stuff. The third building block is know how to communicate.

I focus a lot on the DISC scale: domineering, influential, steady relater, cautious thinker. I may



have the four titles wrong, but you get the idea. I'm a high I, I'm a high D. So I'm the party waiting to happen.

That doesn't work with people who are steady relaters or cautious thinkers. They need somebody who's going to speak more slowly with them. They need someone who's going to supply the details ahead of time. They need someone who's going to tell them what they need to know before they even know they need to know it. What a great statement. So that's a third piece. Know how to communicate. Have the ability to speak to your audience.

The fourth one is to embrace change. Because our world, whether you like it or not, is changing. Our business world is changing. Our work world is changing. Our personal life is changing. Everything changes.

So embrace it. You don't have to agree with it. The big thing I call out in the book is that it is absolutely okay to disagree with the CEO. CEOs read *Sought After* and want everybody to follow those principles.

You may not agree with the proposed change that's coming. And it is absolutely okay to tell the CEO in private that you don't agree. But Chris, you better be a cheerleader when you walk out that door. So that's what I'm trying to get across and then embrace change. If you don't agree, discuss what you don't agree, but do it in private. Don't be a public naysayer because you will not garner anyone's trust under those circumstances.

Those are the four things I put together that made me realize why I'm able to stand on a stage and have a best-selling HR book as well. Because I am sought

after, I've earned it. But I've worked hard for it and continue to do so.

I think the closing premise of the book is its ongoing learning. Find out which of those building blocks you're not the most comfortable in and work on that. When you get comfortable in that one, move on to the next one. It's just ongoing so that you continue to stay on top of your game and continue to be sought after.

Chris O'Byrne

What were your goals for your book when you wrote it?

Karen Young

It was very cathartic for me because I write stories. I write about all the career-defining moments I had at the time they happened. I was like, *Oh, these are career killers*. It turned into career-defining for me. I put in the opening, "This is either going to ruin me, or it's going to be cathartic for me." Thankfully, it was cathartic, but my goal was to demonstrate that it isn't just HR. We are bigger than HR.

One of my goals was to break out of being an HR speaker because I'm a successful business owner. My business has grown every year since I started. I wanted to get into the leadership room and communicate our message—that you need to *work* to be heard, not merely because you have a

degree or a certificate or letters after your name.

It's no guarantee that somebody's going to listen to you. You need to earn the listen.

Chris O'Byrne

How has your book helped your business?

Karen Young

It has really established me as a speaker. I am more marketable now as a speaker because I've demonstrated that I can talk about stuff other than HR. But now that I have the book, I can clearly speak about other things. So, it has opened the door and gotten me into things other than HR, like the Meeting Planners Association, where I've been able to go and help them.

It really comes down to wanting to touch and help as many people as possible. This has widened the ability to do that. It's given me more confidence also as a speaker because I can talk about stuff other than HR. That was a little bit of a self-fulfilling prophecy as well, probably.

Chris O'Byrne

What kind of person would get the most out of reading your book?

Karen Young

I'd suggest anybody that's mid-career. It's good for everybody. It's good for somebody who's just starting because they can set some goals to strive for. But I think the ones who'll be impacted the most are the mid-career people. They might be stagnated right now. They may have gotten to an HR director position, but they've just not had the opportunity to move up in HR. So they may have gotten the director of marketing but not the vice president of marketing or chief marketing officer. They don't understand why they're not playing with the bigger dogs yet. As I said, entry-level employees will have something to focus on, too. And—leaders can use the book as a means of coaching and mentoring their high potentials!

I just saw my first HR mentor. She was my first real HR boss. To this day, I still look at her and don't know how she put up with me. I was one of those college kids who had a college degree and thought I knew everything.

Chris O'Byrne

What lessons did you learn while writing and publishing your book?

Karen Young

I learned to set realistic deadlines and schedule them to make them as important as a client appointment. If you are writing

and under a deadline—or before you're even under a deadline—put it on your calendar schedule; it makes it as holy as a client appointment, so make it as holy as a doctor's appointment in that it's not breakable. You'll fall behind on your timeline. Trust me, writer's block is a real thing. I broke mine by getting out of my environment. I cannot write sitting at my desk. If I'm sitting in my office, I'm in my HR brain, I'm not in my writer's brain. My email is right there, and my team is right there. I'd go to the public library to break my writer's block. But they're not quiet places anymore.

I went to the Hershey Lodge in Pennsylvania to break my writer's block. They have a beautiful lobby with a full-circle fire so that you can sit anywhere around it. There's a nice little bar that's open in the evenings. It wasn't open when I was there, but it's just a nice sit-and-relax area. I needed to be completely out of my element, and I needed to be someplace where I could relax and get out of my own way.

I really think that's what writer's block is. You're overthinking it. You're in your way.

Chris O'Byrne

Tell me about the next book you're working on.

Karen Young

Oh, this is the tell-all book, and everybody's already lining up for it. The working title is *Outrageous People: In the Workplace*.

I'm changing names, but I'm not changing the stories. I am telling real-world stories about what happens. And the approach I'm going to take, of course, is telling a story. I'm going to share what happened, how it was resolved, how we came to that resolution, etc.

I'm going to analyze it from an operational, financial, and cultural standpoint because I want to convey to people that these outrageous individuals hurt the business. The sooner we hold them accountable and align them with our culture—or help them find a new career—the better we all are. So again, I don't want to approach it from an HR standpoint.

There will be HR in it because it's involved in the decisions. I want to make the case that it's not only HR, but also not only the regulations, it's not only the policies and procedures; it's the culture, it's the operation, it's efficiencies. It touches every piece of the business. And we have to be more attuned to that. So, yeah, that's going to be the fun one to write. I think some people are going to love it. I'm hoping for a March 18, 2025, release date. Put it on my calendar!

Chris O'Byrne

What parting words of wisdom do you have?

Karen Young

There's a guy on TikTok, and I don't want to steal his phrase, but one of the things that I end up speaking about is that we have to really enjoy the work that we do because we spend too much time on it.

I want to encourage everybody to have the courage. If you're not happy, dare to find what happiness means to you and pursue it because I am living the dream personally, professionally, as an author, and as a business owner. I have found my happiness. Yes, the phrase is corny, but work doesn't seem like work when you love what you're doing. So find your happy.

Garner up the courage one way or another.

When I left corporate America to start HR Resolutions, I was the breadwinner. It was terrifying. But my husband retired from my company last year, and we're 19-plus years into our 20th anniversary.

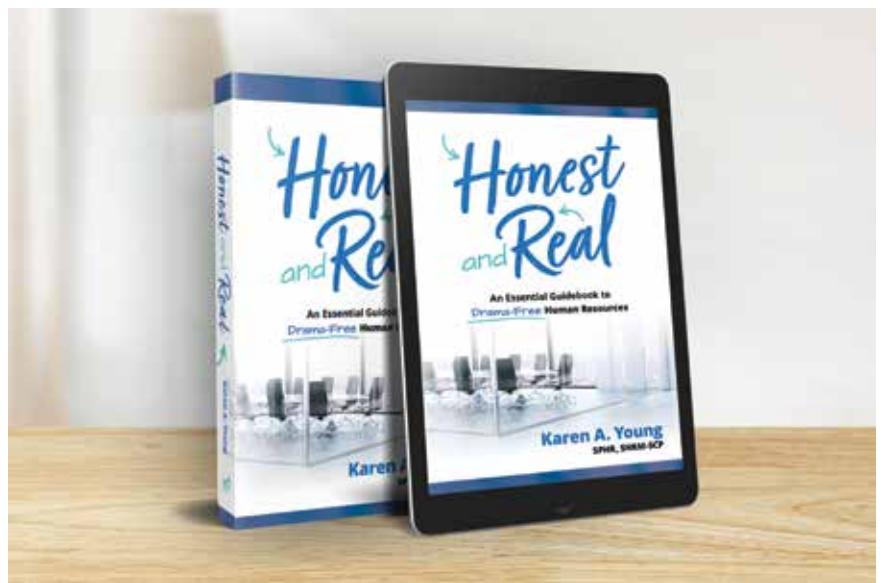
Find the courage because it's worth it.

Chris O'Byrne

Where is the best place for people to go to learn more about you?

Karen Young

To learn more about me, it's best to go to KarenAYoung.com. That has all my speaking stuff. It has sizzle reels from both keynotes and has access to finding the books. My email is info@KarenAYoung.com.



Action Steps

- 1. Assess and improve your workplace culture:** The author emphasizes the importance of a positive corporate culture. Evaluate your current culture and make necessary changes to ensure it aligns with your company's values and supports employee engagement and satisfaction.
- 2. Focus on accountability and communication:** The author highlights the need for clear communication and holding employees accountable. Implement regular check-ins and feedback sessions to foster a culture of transparency and improvement.
- 3. Embrace flexibility and work-life balance:** The author discusses the benefits of a flexible work environment. Consider offering flexible work schedules or remote work options to improve employee morale and productivity.

About the Author

Karen Young is dedicated to inspiring people and organizations to achieve excellence. With a rich background as an employee, entrepreneur, small business owner, and consultant, she shares her extensive knowledge through her work, speaking engagements, and books. Since founding HR Resolutions in 2005, Karen has provided essential human resources support to B2B organizations with 20 to 60 employees, empowering CEOs and leadership teams to focus on growing their businesses by implementing strong HR policies and programs. Her company ensures that companies benefit from expert HR guidance without needing a full HR staff.

An engaging presenter, Karen loves motivating and educating professionals and business owners with strategies designed for real results. She has authored two books: *Honest and Real: An Essential Guidebook to Drama-Free Human Resources* and *Sought-After: How to Be Heard, Be Trusted, and Be Recognized for Your Expertise*. Describing herself as happy, passionate, and focused, Karen enjoys living life to the fullest with her husband Barry and their retired racing greyhounds. Looking for professional inspiration? Karen would love to chat with you about the resources that can elevate you and your company to the next level. Learn more at karenayoung.com.