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Employee Engagement
Fostering Employee Engagement with Long-Term Employees

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In a previous article we talked about the importance of "employee engagement" in relation to how costly employee turnover can be and how frustrating and time-consuming the hiring process is. We looked at some techniques for instilling employee engagement in the hiring/onboarding process. But what about retaining longer term employees? While losing a new employee after investing time, money, and effort into training is hard, losing a long-term, productive, valued employee can have an even more costly, far-reaching impact on your team.

Let's take a look at the concept of "supply and demand" and how it applies to available worker/applicant pools. When economies are doing better, unemployment numbers decrease. According to trading_economics.com, unemployment rates have dropped from 8.9% in July of 2012, to 7.4% in July of 2013, and are expected to continue in a decreasing trend. What these numbers don't tell you is about a little known concept of the "negative 4%". When someone in placement/HR circles see these numbers, they will automatically subtract 4% from unemployment rates for the "unemployable factor"- people who are either unable/unwilling to work. So let's do the math: a 7.4% unemployment rate results in a 3.4% available worker/applicant pool. And if you have an economy where the "demand" increases and the supply decreases, where do you think placement/HR people go shopping for employees? From the 3.4% pool? Or by focusing on the much larger applicant pool of employees who are already productively employed and proving themselves as capable workers? As unemployment rates drop, "poaching" season begins and the targets are your most reliable/best producing employees. Thus "employee engagement" and retaining your productive workers is more important than ever before.

This leaves businesses scrambling for ways to keep long-term employees "engaged" and less likely to jump ship. Upper management/HR often try to throw band-aid approaches to employee retention issues - raises, employee appreciation programs, work-satisfaction surveys, etc. All of these are fine and have merit in their own ways, but you may be surprised that all of these combined still don't have as much impact as one final factor of employee engagement - YOU. Front line supervisor, department manager, grounds crew babysitter, whatever your title may be, those supervising employees truly have the biggest impact, good or bad, on job satisfaction and engagement in the workplace. Imagine being in a situation where your boss showed no interest/appreciation in anything you did, was overly critical of your ideas/efforts, and was negative about your department and the organization in general. Would you be willing to turn down other work opportunities and stay in this employment situation because of a $0.25-an-hour raise? Or because "Employee Appreciation Week" starts next Monday and you've got a company logo mug coming your way? In the day-to-day work world, managers make or break employee engagement.

As an enlightened and forward thinking manager who doesn't want the downtime of replacing staff members every few weeks, what can you do to foster employee engagement with your key, long-term employees? First, take ownership of keeping employees "engaged" in their jobs, and don't look for something to come down from upper management, HR, or any other place "on high." If you want positive, motivated, and invested employees, look no further than your own words, actions, and management style. In an

interview with David Rittof, President and CEO of Modern Management, Inc., he highlights some characteristics of managers who foster employee engagement in the workplace:

"They are role models who exhibit the behavior and understanding they expect from employees." Managers set the bar for their department. They either garner the respect of their employees because of their high work ethic, or they breed apathy and complacency in lowering the bar by doing "just enough to get by." If you want hard-working, positive employees, show them what one looks like.

"They are in frequent contact with employees and have open lines of communication." If employees are uneasy or too intimidated to approach supervisors, then new ideas and contributions are squashed before they even start. When employees feel their ideas are heard, appreciated, and even occasionally implemented, they feel more invested in their jobs and want to continue to contribute bigger and better things to their area.

"They provide regular and substantive feedback regarding an employee's performance." Make sure your employees don't only hear from you when something needs corrected. Acknowledge and let them know what it is about their performance that is successful. Focus not only on how you appreciate the tasks/job they do well, but also relate it to how it has a positive impact on the rest of the team and in achieving departmental/organizational goals. Relate how their individual contributions affect the big picture.

"They are positive in their approaches, upbeat, and informed about the organization's current state of the business." If you want energetic and inspired employees, they need to be hearing positive messages about their team, department, and entire organization that makes them want to do more/go the extra mile. If you frequently complain about the direction of upper management, policies, etc., why would employees take an interest in having to perform tasks to that end? People put forth effort and are engaged/invested in things they feel are worthwhile and make a difference.

Please note that the characteristics listed above do not involve investing thousands of dollars in employee engagement programs that may or may not be effective. They involve managers setting examples and communicating in positive, effective ways, something we should all aspire to regardless. Perhaps the biggest key to employee engagement is an "Engaged Manager."