

Retention Strategy: Meaningful Motivation

Retaining and developing existing talent can be more important to an organization and less expensive than acquiring new talent.

Unfortunately, even if an organization already is focused on retention, chances are good it is following a misguided and expensive compensation approach. "Misguided" may seem like strong criticism, but while extrinsic rewards of money and benefits may cause a short-term burst of productivity, they often don't motivate. Further, they also contain the seed for de-motivation long term because, once compensation is awarded, it becomes expected. So when revenues dictate that bonuses are smaller, people aren't just unmotivated, they are actually de-motivated, making them less satisfied overall with their jobs and, subsequently, the organization.

This finding is at the heart of the work of Frederick Herzberg, who is known in organizational development circles as the father of modern motivation. Herzberg didn't say appropriate compensation isn't necessary. It is. In fact, Herzberg found that while the presence of certain basics such as good working conditions and an appropriate salary didn't motivate or increase job satisfaction, their absence contributed significantly to job dissatisfaction.

Herzberg's research makes it clear that monetary rewards don't motivate and don't compensate for ineffective management. Real motivation comes from work in the form of achievement, recognition, meaningful work, responsibility, advancement and growth.

Managers can't always change the work itself, but there are practical and simple steps they can take to provide a more motivating workplace and manage in a way that changes the relationships employees have with their work, their managers and their organizations.

Leverage the Power of Human Nature

Humans are natural problem solvers. We like to figure things out and determine how things should be done, especially when we're the ones doing them.

This is why when talent managers give people the opportunity to express their opinions and provide input into work processes; they enhance buy-in and ownership, effectively using human drive to an organization's advantage. People who feel ownership of their work are likely to find that work more meaningful than people who have no say in how things are done.

For example: The next time a talent leader assigns a project, make sure that leader knows that people clearly understand the desired end result and the parameters for the work and also provides the latitude for them to determine how they are going to achieve it. Recognizing this natural human drive to be a part of the solution is a critical first step to motivating people to do their best and enjoy doing it.

Manage Performance and Mentor People

Talent leaders also must recognize this human drive to problem solve in themselves, and then curb it. If a manager is focused on his group's performance, he or she will feel the need to provide answers and solve problems, making employees feel less necessary in the process.

The talent manager's most effective role is to empower and mentor. In this role, the leader will motivate people to do more, and performance will take care of itself. Plus, helping people realize they can perform job tasks with less help enables them grow personally and professionally while making the managers' job that much easier.

When a talent leader is compelled to provide answers, he or she should ask questions instead. Asking good questions is a great way to help people learn to problem-solve and make good decisions. It gives people the opportunity to discover the answers for themselves, which gives their work meaning and provides the right environment for sustainable learning, adding to their personal skill set and growth, which also is great for the organization.

Focus on the Person, Not the Job

When talent managers make people feel like they care more about the work than the employees, it can promote feelings of insignificance. Conversely, an employee who feels his manager's concern for his well-being is more likely to experience the trust characteristic of high-performing teams and organizations.

Talent leaders should take time to get to know their employees. This will not only help to build trust, it will provide invaluable insight into what motivates them. Different things motivate different people. One person might be thrilled about new responsibilities as a project manager, while another might experience a greater sense of achievement when allowed to actually produce the desired end product.

In addition to being sensitive to individual role preferences, it pays to note the varying degrees of structure individuals need to be happy in those work roles. Some people need and prefer more direction and clarification than others. This is especially true in ambiguous or uncertain situations.

To assess individual need for structure, ask people to write down questions they have about their jobs. Someone with lots of questions probably needs more structure, while the person who has few questions almost certainly needs less.

Show Up When Things Are Going Well

Being the human problem solvers we are, it's natural for a manager to intervene more often when something is not working than when things are going smoothly. Unfortunately, in this type of environment, employees soon begin to fear every conversation with managers, viewing them as people who show up only when there's a problem.

Brain chemistry research shows this fear of criticism actually triggers the fight-or-flight response, bathing the brain in fear hormones that increase defensive behavior and actually inhibit learning. Talent managers that only talk to employees when something's wrong end up with defensive and withholding employees, and fewer opportunities to uncover the information they need to know about workers and their performance.

To avoid this common scenario, talent leaders should intentionally make time to recognize employees for what is working. Schedule regular meetings where people are invited to report their successes. This structured recognition date will prompt employees to look forward to seeing the talent manager, motivating them to share everything necessary about their performance, as well as how to mentor them and help them achieve even more.

Plus, in the process of learning what's working, the manager also will learn what's not working. But the interaction starts with attention on what the person is doing right, which creates an atmosphere in which people are more open to suggestion and learning can take place.

Publicly Recognize Great Performance

In addition to making time to let employees tout their own achievements in private, public recognition helps to reinforce a sense of accomplishment and accountability. When people are publicly recognized for a job well done, they experience that sense of achievement all over again, which makes them eager to get back to work and tackle the next problem even more skillfully.

When a manager sees good problem solving and decision making, he or she should acknowledge the success privately and in front of others. Timing is important, so don't wait for the annual awards banquet. Making public recognition spontaneous and frequent will motivate everyone, create an environment that supports and encourages ongoing learning, achievement and accountability for all. This motivational culture is good for the employee, the manager and the organization.

But when attempting to recognize and motivate employees to do better work, talent managers should ask: Will my actions contribute to the person's sense of achievement or recognition? Do they fit their individual preferences? Will my actions enable him or her to grow and be prepared to take on more responsibility? Do they make the work more meaningful?

If the answers to any of these questions is no, talent leaders should recognize that while they may make the person feel rewarded for a job well done, they probably won't achieve the long-term motivation they're looking for.

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