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Retention Leadership: Three Key Drivers for Retaining the "Best of the Best" in Your Organization

By: Karla Brandau

Executives whose daily challenges in the 21st Century global environment include how to work with China and India, understanding the MySpace Generation, and how to get more free publicity while paying for less advertising, are familiar with initiatives to increase innovation, streamline business processes and motivate for higher individual productivity. However, these executives are now looking at the work of their organization through another dimension: leadership and the retention of employees.

According to the Harvard Business Review, not paying attention to the retention of employees puts the company in a position to lose people with talents they need, often inadvertently retaining people with outdated or ordinary skills. In a brain-based economy in need of retention, people are your best assets, not empty chess pieces to be moved around by inexperienced managers. Top managers improve retention rates if they immerse themselves in creating an environment where the best, the brightest and the most creative are attracted, motivated and set free to produce.

Three critical leadership drivers bring high retention results:

Driver #1: Connect on a Human Level

Dealing with data, bytes, and scientific thinking in a high tech environment can obscure the fact that you are working with human beings with emotions and mortal needs. A good retention program starts with managers who know how to connect on a human level, not just be someone whose position on the organizational chart makes it possible for him/her to force compliance to rules and policies.

People will personally commit to certain individuals who, on the organizational chart, possess little authority but instead possess pizzazz, drive, expertise, and genuine caring for teammates and products. Think of the power of having a position on the organizational chart as well as the personal charisma to inspire and lead. These three things will make your formal title jump off the org chart, creating synergistic team work and expanding your influence:

- **Check the Ego.** Never let your ego get so close to your position that it defines your position and eclipses everyone else in the department or on the team. In well-run organizations, titles are also pretty meaningless. At best, they advertise some authority, an official status conferring the ability to give orders and induce obedience. But titles mean little in terms of real power, which is the capacity to influence and inspire.
- **Flex your style.** Blindly following strict managerial guidelines or the current management fad generates rigidity in thought and action and reduces your credibility. Learn to flex your style: Sometimes speed to market is more important than total quality. Sometimes an unapologetic directive is more appropriate than participatory discussion. Some situations require the leader to hover closely; others require long, loose leashes. The best leaders honor their core values, but are flexible in how they execute them. They understand that management techniques are not magic mantras but simply tools to be reached for at the right times.
- **Exhibit optimism.** In a recent seminar, I met Bernard "Butch" Deuto who was a young man at NASA working on the ground crew during the Apollo 13 crises. He said that during the crisis, there was no doubt, no negativism, no whining, no pointing of fingers. There was only an optimistic attitude and a determination to succeed. Failure truly was not an option. Failure never entered their minds. In a similar fashion, when faced with tough competition, cost overruns, product defects, and a myriad of other problems, a leader with determination and

optimism focuses workers on solutions, no problems. Morale improves.

Driver Two: Offer leadership Training that focuses on the Growth of the Employee

Studies document that an employee's level of satisfaction with their direct manager's leadership style is critical to a satisfactory work environment and to retention. Researchers find that the relationship with the employee's immediate supervisor carried more impact on the employee than overall company policies or procedures. This relationship also determines productivity levels. To keep bright employees engaged in their jobs and at high levels, managers should provide:

- **Information.** Information is a source of power. Unskilled managers keep it close to the vest and stingily dole it out in snippets of information on a 'need to know' basis as if the employee was on a top secret mission. Without a big picture of the project, it is easy for employees to stray from the vision or end-goal of the product or service.
- **Support.** Mental and emotional support takes many forms. Setting clear goals, accepting ideas, affirming suggestions, making recommendations when stuck on a particular point are all ways to support. Perhaps the best support for the retention of entrepreneurial-minded, innovative employees is to give them the room to try innovative ideas and take calculated risks without the fear of failure, retaliation or a pink slip.
- **Resources.** Resources are not just pencils, printers and up-to-date software but also involve access to other people in the organization. Providing the appropriate resources may involve putting together special teams to tackle tough problems and stimulate creative ideas.
- **Opportunities.** Employees need the opportunity to improve their own status within the organization and to invest in themselves in the form of personal development. People will jump ship not just for more pay, but for better opportunities to learn and grow. Retention leadership encourages everyone's evolution.

Driver Three: Insist on ethical conduct.

The fastest way to alienate the best and the brightest of your workforce and send them networking for another job is to destroy trust by unethical behaviors. ... Unethical behavior is a precarious precipice with resulting chaos in employee ranks. Successful organizations have a leadership team that insists on honesty and ethical conduct at every level in the organization. In essence, the excellent leadership team creates an organizational culture of integrity.

Cultural integrity, however, is more than insisting on ethical behavior. It is more than requiring ethics training for all employees. On a deeper level, it is:

- **Living and validating organizational mission and vision.**
- **Leading by example in matters of honesty and trustworthiness.**
- **Aligning employees with organizational values.**
- **Encouraging candid conversations.**
- **Insuring that deadlines are met.**
- **Demanding high product standards.**
- **Replacing blame with problem analysis.**
- **Rewarding employees appropriately.**

[Creating a culture of integrity] in your organization involves attention to employee accountability as well as managerial responsibilities. For instance, leadership integrity involves providing clear instructions for the parameters of the project while permitting the employee to retain responsibility for clarifying instructions and meeting deadlines. Good employees respond to standards [built on integrity] and to leaders who convey an unwavering firmness and consistency in their actions while exhibiting clarity of purpose.

Conclusion

These three leadership retention drivers will retain your best and brightest employees and contribute to the forward movement of your company in the chaotic 21st century global workplace.