

Human Resources, Recruitment & Training

Times Are Changing for Employee Loyalty

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Mr. Feeney

A recent report from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, showed that close to 3 million people voluntarily quit their jobs a couple of years ago, a 17% increase from the previous year, proving that opportunities for employees are abundant and we have shifted back to a candidate-driven marketplace. Why is this important? Employee retention should always be of utmost importance, but requires awareness as to why employees leave to begin with. Numerous statistics show that the #1 reason people quit their jobs is a disconnect or poor relationship with their boss or immediate supervisor or manager. This shows that turnover of staff is mostly a manager issue.

In other words, the responsibility rests primarily on leadership's shoulders to engage, mentor and retain employees. Establishing mutual commitments is the key to a meaningful relationship. This is true for personal relationships, relationships with clients, and relationships with employees. The bedrock of a meaningful relationship is trust, and trust is solidified or broken based on reliability in the form of honoring our commitments.

We have all heard expressions like, "his actions spoke so loud, I could not hear his words" or, "she says what she will do, and does what she says."

On the other hand, aren't we all working alongside some select individuals who haven't "gotten over themselves?" In nearly every professional environment, it is not uncommon to encounter those who have an inflated sense of their own importance, a deep need for admiration and an occasional lack of empathy for others. These individuals can range from recent college grads to the most tenured of staff, and some could even be some of the most valued players on the team! An effective leader needs to be able to lead, manage and inspire all personality types, including how to embrace the entitled.

Although tales that start with "back in my day" typically fall on deaf ears (or are met with an eyeball roll), it may be meaningful to take a trip down memory lane at times. Newer employees may not know the sacrifices that their company was built upon; consider creating a milestone wall or worksheet documenting key turning points in the history of the company. Reviewing a company's past can help emphasize the sacrifices that were made, the noteworthy accomplishments along the way, and a common understanding of where the firm started and how it evolved to where it is today.

Words matter. Consider the difference between "you have a face that makes time stand still" and "you have a face that could stop a clock." Entitled individuals believe themselves to be more special than others; frame your vocabulary to play against this notion. Instead of "you are the best hire we have ever made in this department" or "we would be lost without you," focus instead on expressing appreciation for a job well done. Statements such as "I appreciate the hard work you put in to meeting your quarterly numbers" or "I am incredibly thankful for the leadership role you played in retaining our key clients" focus more on the work being done as opposed to the uniqueness and rarity of the person doing the work. Call attention to the specific action or behavior, and then offer up genuine thanks and gratitude.

To encourage self-absorbed individuals to look outside their lens of individuality, add some components to their set of responsibilities that require the success of others. This could be accomplished by tying a portion of compensation or bonus to the success of new hires, the team, or organization as a whole. Alternatively, the individual could be assigned as a mentor to up-and-coming associates, where praise is given to the collective and expectations are set for cooperative achievement.

Creative "Out of the Box Thinking"

Leaders sometimes acknowledge that it was through their greatest struggles that their greatest achievements were born. More often than not, those who history best remembers were faced with numerous obstacles that forced them to work harder and show more determination than others.

Entitled employees tend to stay within their comfort zones and take few risks. Set a stretch goal for those who feel they cannot fail, but do not chastise for shortfalls or lack of success. Instead, allow for the individual to embrace the mistakes made, the skills that are not yet developed, and the opportunities for growth that lie ahead. In fact, many great leaders would say they don't just accept failure, they encourage it.

The easiest way to create this blueprint? Solicit feedback from the team! They are your audience of judges, and they will give you the

answers to the test. Ask questions and be open to receiving feedback:

- Who would you say is the best boss you've ever had (present company excluded, of course)? What characteristics or qualities did they have that stand out?
- What would you replicate from previous companies or departments in which you've worked?
- What do you most appreciate about the leadership of our organization/team?
- As leaders, what are we not doing that we should be?
- If you became CEO tomorrow, what is the first thing you would change? Why?

From that feedback, come up with a list of five or ten expectations to which you know you can be held accountable. Make the expectations quantifiable, so that issues will not arise with relativity. Do not commit to something in which you will likely fall short; this should be set in stone on both sides and waver only for special exceptions or with permission from the other party. The key is that you cover what your team can count on from you in your professional relationship, and that what they can count on are things that matter to them.

It can be easy to create a list of the behaviors that we want others to exhibit, but tougher when we have to declare the same for ourselves. The following are some examples of commitments that could be modified for your own professional environment, and made quantifiable as much as possible:

- Go to the Source - I will have the courage to respectfully confront (to provide feedback) and be confronted (to receive feedback). I will provide you with honest guidance regarding your performance on a consistent basis, and do so in a private environment.
- Career Path Blueprint - I will provide a career path with quantifiable benchmarks, and educate you as to the vision I have for you and your contribution. I will see potential in you that you may not yet see in yourself, and remain committed to your professional development.
- Mutual Accountability - In service of your long-term potential, I will hold you accountable to doing the things you said you would do. I will invite feedback consistently about my leadership abilities, our team's dynamic, and how things can improve.
- Timely Response - I will respond to all emails promptly and will not cancel standing meetings unless there is a true emergency or unavoidable last-minute conflict.
- Consistency - I will have times of being intensely focused on a project or unavailable at times, but I will not allow myself to have any passive aggressive or "bad days." You can count on my consistency as a leader and colleague.

Create the same list of commitments for employees, and consider asking current staff to help create the list of things they want in teammates. The expectations could include things like desired behaviors, time in office, work ethic, required results, or any other guidelines that allow an employee to know they are meeting expectations. Resist the urge to simply say "I'll know a job well done when I see it" – if you can't articulate expectations clearly, employees will never know if they've achieved them. This is when a disconnect happens, and the foundation of the relationship begins to crack.

What happens when an expectation is not met? Give both sides permission, early on, to approach the other when this happens. When it does, there is the opportunity to engage in additional dialogue and share relevant information that may shift the perspective of the situation. There is also the opportunity to course correct immediately, as sometimes we don't realize an issue exists until an outside party points it out! Choose to foster, and demonstrate to employees, an environment of high accountability and expectations of one another. The strongest organizations and teams are built by those who honor their commitments.

Great Expectations

Be exceptionally clear (and when at all possible, measurable) with any and all expectations. Consider going beyond "pass or fail" and instead communicate clearly what deficient (failure), competent (good enough to get by), and proficient (exceptional) behavior or results look like. Then, stick to them firmly. If you don't, you can actually create a deepened sense of entitlement as employees learn to manipulate your rules. The expectations could include things like desired behaviors, time in office, work ethic, required results, or any other guidelines that allow an employee to know they are meeting or exceeding expectations. Resist the urge to simply say "I'll know a job well done when I see it" – if you can't articulate expectations clearly, employees will never know if they've achieved them. This is when a disconnect happens, ambiguity sets in, and the foundation of the relationship begins to crack.

Perhaps even more important? Deep down, we all want to be involved with an important project that challenges us. When we give a tough objective and let an employee know it will take everything they've got, it communicates that we actually take them seriously and give them permission to take risks that result in growth – either due to failure or due to success.

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