

CREATING A CULTURE FOR RETENTION

by Angelo Pesce, CHRP, CMC

Introduction

Retention has become a hot topic for most organizations today, primarily because we face a demographic crunch in the workplace, caused by two major factors. The first is a shortage of skilled workers and the second is the aging work force.

It is no secret that the 'baby boom' generation has reached retirement age and are leaving the work place, and that the generations that follow cannot adequately replace them. When faced with such shortages in the past, Canada has always turned to immigration as an answer. This is a topic unto itself and will not be discussed in this article. (*See Older Workers: The Solution to Coming Labour Shortages.*) Suffice it to say that, typically, we tend to under-employ immigrants and that, this time, immigration will not be the whole answer to skill shortages.

The aging work force also presents a retention problem. Aging workers have unique needs that require new and innovative work-place solutions. The old, standard work rules don't apply very well to this group. Keeping them committed to the organization and wanting to stay should be of primary importance in any retention strategy. Older workers are an important asset to the workplace and employers who adjust their work environment to meet the needs of older workers will benefit by resolving some of their labour shortages.

Workplace culture is a significant contributor to people staying or going. A culture that promotes commitment to the mission, vision, and values of the organization is extremely important. To stay, workers need to believe in the culture of the workplace. This connection isn't just going to happen. Leaders need to devote time, effort, and money to creating a culture that will promote retention.

What's Older Workers Care About Most

In 2007, Sanofi Avantis conducted a survey of older health-care workers. Employees were asked several questions regarding their relationship to the employer. Two of the questions are of particular interest.

First: Why was the employee considering a new employer? Seventy per cent wanted more flexible hours, almost 70% wanted benefits into retirement, and 60% wanted to mentor or train younger staff. These responses indicate what is important to an aging work force — so important that they will seek employers who will provide them.

Second: What are the most important factors in a good job? Employees who responded said they wanted to be treated fairly and to work with supportive and trusting workers, competent managers, and a good benefit package. This last point is now an expectation and, while it may not be an advantage, it can be a distinct disadvantage if an employer's benefit package is not competitive. Beware of being 'penny-wise and pound-foolish' in this area.

CULTURE

As a result of many years of experience, much reading, interviewing both managers and staff, and analysing what makes people care about an organization, I have developed the following definition of organizational culture:

People love going to work when they feel good about what they do. They feel they are making a difference and are recognized for it. The organization is well managed and it encourages relationships of all types. The work place is clean, inviting, and safe.

What follows is an analysis of each underlined statement and presents some actions an organization can take to create this positive work culture.

Feeling good about what they do

For employees to feel good about the work they do, three elements must be present:

1. Employees must have the skills and abilities to do the job

This creates self-confidence, a very important ingredient in feeling good about a job. All too often, we hire people who are not fully qualified, especially in times of shortage, just to get a 'warm body' in place. The result is that we end up with mediocre employees who do not feel good about themselves or the job they do. As solutions, we must:

- develop the right criteria, hire the right people, and evaluate against those original criteria
- ensure the right fit, not just from a technical standpoint, but from the viewpoint of the organization's culture as well
- create a developmental plan for each employee to address whatever skill or ability is not fully meeting the job criteria
- provide proper orientation for new employees.

Proper *orientation* of new employees is a must. When people start a new job, they are at their most positive. This is the time to ensure that they understand the vision, mission, and values of the organization. Create pride in the organization by sharing the history of the company or organization, how it works with the community and the customers or clients, and tie it all into how they can contribute to the success of the company.

2. Employees must have 'resonance; with the type of work the organization does

Creating a connection between the individual's profession and the organization's work contributes to the employees feeling good about the work they do. In a hospital setting, for example, newly hired nurses come to work already positively predisposed to the goals of the institution because they are, by and large, people who want to provide care.

3. Employees need to feel pride in their employer

If the employer is seen as a great organisation by their community or their industry, this becomes a source of pride for the employees. People want to work for these companies because, by association, they too are seen as special. Bench-marking with other similar organizations and surveying staff and clients will help to determine ways in which organizations can become great companies to work for.

Making a contribution and being recognized for it

This element entails the sharing of managerial power. In every organization, the power to decide what authority to give to subordinates and all that follows (such as involvement in decision-making and accountability) rests with the leadership. The leadership must decide to what extent decision-making should be delegated, as well as how much authority to give employees, including a corresponding accountability system. Freedom to act creates the environment for an employee to feel he is making a contribution. Organizational design that takes into account the points above becomes a must.

Employees also expect relevant and appropriate recognition. This should be both intrinsic and extrinsic. For example, a monetary award sent in the mail for achieving a milestone will not accrue as much satisfaction as the same reward presented in a public ceremony. Recognition programs that are connected to the values of the organization contribute positively to the recognition factor, which in turn helps with retention.

Employees also expect to be supported in their quest to stay current, enhance their educational credentials, and pursue self-development. Furthermore, they expect support for a healthy and balanced lifestyle.

Well-managed organization

As noted above, employees need and want to feel pride in the organization. The company needs to have a good reputation in the community and in their industry. To achieve a good reputation, an organization must be well managed in every area: human and physical resources, quality of product or service, finances, and so on.

Reputations (good and bad) grow largely by word of mouth. To be well informed about their work place, employees need accurate, relevant, timely, and easily understood information. Therefore, a communications plan that provides employees with this information is fundamental.

Other ways to demonstrate that the organization is well-managed include respecting and following human-resource policies; this demonstrates integrity. Similarly, adhering to the collective agreement in unionized environments demonstrates integrity and respect for employees.

Relationships

The real lifeline of all cultures in organizations comes in the form of relationships. In any organization, there are four types of relationships as follows:

1. Positive relationships among leaders

If the senior management team respects each other, this will percolate downwards, contributing to a work place that people want to work in every day. To encourage this culture, leaders must live the values of the organization.

2. Positive relationships with clients and the community

Employees will respond positively if they see that the organization truly values its clients and the community they live in. It is a source of pride and helps them make a commitment to the organization. When leaders are seen to be living the mission and vision, this positive culture is enhanced.

3. Positive relationships with fellow workers

No one wants to go to work or to stay long term in a work place where relationships among staff are negative. Not consistently enforcing the values of the organization is a huge

contributing factor. As well, unresolved conflict between employees can quickly poison a work environment.

Well-thought-out conflict resolution processes and disciplinary processes are two key areas for resolving these negative contributors to staff-to-staff relationships.

4. Positive relationships with supervisors

It is well established that a negative relationship with one's supervisor is a key reason that employees leave an organization. Leaders must become competent coaches and mentors. They must also respect the policies and processes that affect staff. Visibly demonstrating this respect will generate trust and improve performance; as a result, staff will want to stay.

In today's complex world of work, relying on the good instincts of the supervisor will not suffice. Leadership development programs must be provided so that managers and supervisors can upgrade their leadership skills.

Clean, inviting, and safe work place

It is said that one can tell organizations that really care about their people by how clean, safe, and inviting the work place is. When considering the effort and resources needed to maintain the physical plant, this says to employees "we care."

Staff need work space appropriate to their jobs. Paying attention to office design also demonstrates caring and is seen as supportive of employees achieving their performance goals.

In addition, care must be taken to create space for relaxation. Lunch rooms, lounges, and other similar space must be designed to create a welcoming and safe environment.

CONCLUSION

There are many factors that contribute to decisions on the part of employees to stay or go. The work environment has a significant impact on that decision. Having a work culture that tells employees they are valued and respected for their contribution is, at the very least, a sound strategic retention strategy.

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