

Keeping Talent

Conventional thinking has usually held that people are replaceable. Company assets consist of tangible things like property and equipment. But successful organizations realize, now more than ever, that people, particularly talented ones, are really their most valuable present and future assets. So why do organizations have so much trouble retaining talent? Why does talent sometimes become disillusioned and leave?

At the core of the problem is the fact that talent and their managers are often competitors who are each striving to climb the same corporate ladder. Many times their personal career goals are in direct conflict. A key source of this conflict is that talent comes into an organization eager to learn, grow and develop their careers as quickly as possible. They seek stretch opportunities that will provide them with real experience leading to advancement. This includes hands-on experience where they can make mistakes and then figure out how to correct them.

For managers, giving talent these types of stretch opportunities can be risky to their own careers because managers are ultimately responsible for the work produced. If an individual fails to deliver or makes a mistake on an important project, the buck stops with the manager. In many cases, the safest course for a manager is to limit the amount of responsibility that they give talent until they are absolutely sure that an individual can handle the work. The result is that talent can end up spending lots of time working for people who are less capable than they but have more experience.

Managers similarly don't have strong incentives to develop and move talent up through the pipeline. Great employees are hard to find and every manager wants to keep them on their team. Traditionally managers have avoided competition between themselves and the talent they manage by bringing talented individuals with them as they move up the organizational ladder. Talent today, however, is not always as ready to link their career to a particular manager. They are aware that jobs are extremely fluid and have no guarantees.

The solution to this problem is not simple. As long as organizations are essentially hierarchical and talent and their managers are trying to climb the same ladder to the top, they will remain competitors with conflicting interests. Only by flattening the organization or finding ways to team talent with managers whose positions and career paths are secure or on a different track can this problem begin to be addressed.