

## Workforce Discontent

### Is It a Problem in Your Organization?

*by Jon Craighead*

In a recent Associated Press article, Martha Irvine describes the significant level of discontent within the workforce originating in the Gen X population. Normally we might expect such complaining from the Gen Y folk – the entitlement generation. But it's surprising to hear such wrangling from the Gen Xers, the 32- to 44-year-old group that followed the boomers and are often described as adaptable and self-sufficient. This group is more likely to be overlooked because management's attention is on the younger, more demanding workers. What's going on? Why is this normally content group suddenly becoming arbiters of dissatisfaction?

In the November issue of Business Week a piece titled "Are Your Employees Just Biding Their Time?" speaks of the potential exodus of employees waiting for the job market to open up. Geoff Colvin of Fortune Magazine describes the frustration of employees who fear that their leaders are disappearing rather than stepping forward. Dissatisfaction from this group, which is so out of character, is a matter not to be ignored.

The latest Workplace Insights Survey by Adecco Group North America indicates that 25% of workers are less likely to be looking for another job in today's tightening labor market. However, when the job market thaws they are likely to seek greener pastures. The survey showed a majority of American workers are unhappy in several categories: 66% are dissatisfied with their compensation; 78% do not like their company's overall retention efforts; 76% percent are not satisfied with future career growth opportunities; 48% are not satisfied with the relationship they have with their boss; 59% are not satisfied with the level of support they receive from their colleagues; 77% are not satisfied with the company strategy and vision and its leadership. What workers are telling us is that, during a recession, just having a job does not equate to job satisfaction.

On the other hand, employees need to be conscious of the concerns and efforts of their leadership staff who, on a daily basis, are managing through an extremely tough environment. Workers must appreciate that, in times of crisis, senior staff members spend many hours on the phones and in meetings making high-stakes decisions they think will serve their customers, employees, and the organization. What is needed more than ever is a coming together with open hearts and minds to create the best possible solutions for everyone. Closed-door meetings and secret conversations

without a follow-up commitment to full disclosure only add fear and frustration to the uncertainty. Leadership needs to communicate in open dialogue to the workforce that they are valued and appreciated, and that it is the company's intention to manage frugally in these difficult times with the full commitment, in better times, to retention, development, growth and compensation.

In a recent conversation an organizational president told me her biggest surprise has been how important relationship is in leadership. When partnership, trust, and mutual respect are practiced by both the leadership and the workforce, there will be fewer surprises and disconnects throughout the organization. This in turn generates a high level of employee ownership and loyalty, and high-quality production output.

If the previously stated statistics regarding employee dissatisfaction come as a surprise to you, I suggest that this level of relationship is missing in your organization. Simply posing the question is insufficient; leaders need to be alert to tell-tale signs of discontent such as lateness, illnesses, rework, withdrawal, and an increase in rumors. These issues are worthy of investigation. All people, at every level in the workforce, need to know they make a difference.

From a business perspective, CEOs in repeated surveys express major concerns regarding employee retention and development. Replacing trained and experienced workers with new and unfamiliar personnel is costly and has a direct impact on product and service quality. These elements directly impact your customer relationship. Customers want to know and be assured they can count on vendors to deliver high quality goods and services so they can get their job done. Once that bond is broken, it is just a matter of time before the customer is looking for a new vendor.

Undeniably, and in a most profound way, we all need to have each other win and thrive. In almost every annual report you will read, "Our employees are our most important asset." I'll add: No kidding! – This is even more important when everyone is pressed to get the most out of every dollar spent. No one has time or patience for reworking and product replacement. In most instances you only get limited opportunities to deliver value – when you don't, the organization's future is in jeopardy.