

Retaining Top Talent

Losing top talent can be a traumatic experience for any leader. Hearing the news makes your heart sink and shifts your reality. It's not just business; it's personal. They aren't just leaving the organization; they're leaving you. In spite of all the time spent together, they have decided that your best efforts as a leader weren't good enough. To cope, you rationalize: "They come and they go. Nothing I could have done. No one is indispensable. No big deal." But according to Susan Cramm, a leadership coach, author, and former executive it is a big deal. However it's not necessarily about you, but rather it's all about them.

Losing high performers is painful, both personally and professionally. However, leaders can reduce the risk of losing the right people for the wrong reasons by working collaboratively with them to identify challenging assignments that tap into their passions and career goals.

Most leaders sidestep career discussions because they don't think it's their responsibility. While this is fundamentally true, most people don't have well-articulated career goals or feel comfortable talking with their supervisors about the type of opportunities that would help them develop. As a result, they find it easier to converse with a recruiter rather than their boss as they consider the future of their careers.

Customizing opportunities to each employee requires that leaders understand their people's goals, motivations and values. It's a simple process, but very few leaders do it or even know how to do it. Review these questions and try to answer them for one of your direct reports:

- What are your proudest accomplishments and biggest disappointments? Why?
- What activities energize you and drain you?
- How would you rank the following rewards: financial gain, power and influence, lifestyle, autonomy, affiliation, intellectual challenge, competence, recognition?
- If you died tomorrow, what would you want your legacy to be?
- What is your five-year career goal? If you don't have one, what's your "best guess"?

Don't panic if you are left with a lot of white space. Typically, leaders get to know their people within the context of their current assignments, treating their past and imagined future as unimportant to the task at hand. But they are important, and you should care. Start the process of getting to know your people better by meeting with them one-on-one. When scheduling the meeting, let them know that you want to discuss their passions and career goals. Send them the five questions above, requesting that they provide written responses prior to the meeting.

To prepare for the meeting, review their answers and be ready to discuss who they are and what they love. For example, why did they enjoy the acquisition project, or find the new product rollout frustrating? Note any inconsistencies among their motivators, values and career goal (for example, that they want to spend more time with their family but are interested in working in a global position). Determine if their five-year career goal is specific enough to be used as a baseline in career and performance development conversations that follow.

Make the meeting about them. Ask questions, reflect back what you hear and be encouraging. Don't provide feedback or advice, just listen and learn. If you follow these steps, your people will leave the meeting feeling honored, respected, and energized, and you will have the insights necessary to help them define their development objectives and build their future assignments in a way that matches their aspirations.

It's hard to overstate the importance of staying in close contact with your high potential employees. You may have high expectations of them, but they also have high expectations of you. Make it hard for them to leave you by making sure you don't leave them.