

Labor market heats up: Are your best people looking?

January 6, 2012 by Tim Gould



With recent news of increased hiring nationally, one question arises: How do your managers plan to hang on to their best people in 2012?

There's certainly no dearth of opinions about how managers motivate, nurture and reward employees – and make them want to stick around.

But many of these theories stress the nuts and bolts of manager behavior – as in, “you need to praise at least three employees in your department every day.”

That approach tends to overlook the key issue: What do employees want from their job on an emotional level?

Here's a rundown of the things the experts say resonate most with employees – and make them want to stick around:

- **Clear expectations.** Pretty simple: Workers want to know exactly what they're responsible for, and what they'll be judged on.
- **A sense of control.** Employees aren't robots. They need to feel they have the power to decide how their jobs can be completed – and the freedom to suggest how tasks can be simplified or streamlined.
- **Feeling they're “in the loop.”** Employees not only wish to know – and have input on – what's going on in their department, but what's happening in the business as a whole. And they want to be secure in their understanding of how what they do on a day-to-day basis fits into the overall operation – today and in the future.

- **Room to grow.** These include potential promotions, extra training, learning new skills and the possibility of using those new skills in a different area of the company.
- **Recognition.** Everyone wants to believe their extra effort won't go unnoticed – or unrewarded.
- **Leadership.** Employees want to be led by people they trust. And the people they trust are those who value workers' contributions, recognize and accept differences in people and act with employees' best interests in mind.

Changing outdated beliefs

Time was, managers didn't worry about what motivated workers or how they felt about their jobs: "They're getting a paycheck, right? So they'll do what I tell them to do."

Pretty clear that philosophy won't cut it any more.

Here are a few additional outdated beliefs (which are, unfortunately, still all too common among managers):

"I can motivate people."

Wrong. Nobody can motivate anybody else – it's up to the individual to find his or her own motivation.

It's a manager's job to foster an atmosphere where employees have reason to feel motivated.

"Money is the only motivator that matters."

No, it's not. As we said earlier, money plays a key role in the worker/employer relationship. And money may well make employees stay in their jobs, because they have responsibilities or wish to maintain a certain lifestyle.

But no amount of money can make employees love their jobs, or feel a real sense of loyalty to their employer. Those kinds of commitments are made on an emotional level.

"Fear is the best motivator."

Fear can, indeed, be a strong motivator – for a very short time and for all the wrong reasons. The manager who rules by threat often wonders why his turnover rate is so high.

"I know what motivates me, so I know what motivates my people."

Highly unlikely. Everybody's got their own set of interests, priorities and needs. Some employees value their craft, the day-to-day care they take in completing tasks. Others get satisfaction from the monetary success of the product they work on. Still others value workplace camaraderie.

Managers who assume their employees are just like them are unwittingly putting a cap on their workers' success.

Like it or not, touchy-feely is important

“Emotional intelligence:” You’ve heard the phrase – it’s been brought up about as often as the term “engagement” over the last couple years – and while it grates on the nerves of many managers, it’s nonetheless an important concept.

It merely signifies the change in how today’s great managers handle their employees.

The days of “my way or the highway” are gone.

Now, managers need to have real relationships with their people. They need to know what makes each employee unique – his or her talents, weaknesses, sense of humor, family situation ... the whole picture.

Then great managers use all that data to put each employee in a position to thrive.