Why You’re Not Retaining Top Talent by Jim Pelletier

Whether you are the person in charge of hiring and promoting others into leadership positions, or you are the leader more directly impacting staff, here are seven tips to ensure leaders positively impact retention:

- **Focus hiring and promotions on performance and leadership competencies, not personality.** This will not only positively impact retention, but also culture. Tae Hea Nahm, managing director of venture capital firm Storm Ventures, says it best in a *New York Times* article: “No matter what people say about culture, it's all tied to who gets promoted, who gets raises, and who gets fired. You can have your stated culture, but the real culture is defined by compensation, promotions, and terminations.”

- **Don’t overwork top talent.** Yes, you are recognizing their strengths, but it’s not fair to go to that well every time. Fatigue leads to burnout, which builds frustration and resentment. This is especially dangerous because it often starts as a reward for good performance with the leader thinking, “I’m giving you more responsibility because you’ve proven your value.” It often ends up with the high performer wondering, “Why am I putting in all of this extra time and effort while others sit around getting paid as much or more than me?”

- **Recognize that longevity doesn’t create leaders.** Too often we equate length of employment with preparation for a leadership position. Leadership skills don’t come naturally to everyone and there is no correlation between the two.

- **Incentivize and reward good effort, not just good work.** Individuals and organizations can learn a lot from failure that can be leveraged for future success. Make “It’s OK to fail” a genuine living, breathing thing.

- **Model empathetic and compassionate behavior.** Understand that employees have lives outside of the office and those lives can be complicated. Instead of assuming that an employee doesn’t want to get ahead because he or she leaves right at 5pm every day, consider that the employee may be the sole caretaker for an elderly parent at home.

- **Be profoundly honest.** Employees tend to mirror their boss’ behavior. In that sense, the more authentic and vulnerable you are, the more you will see it reflected back at you. If you’re seen as inauthentic or phony, that is what you’ll get in return and you’ll be completely caught off guard when the next high performer tenders his or her resignation.

- **Focus on self-awareness.** Too many leaders cruise through the day assuming everyone is on board with their decisions and actions. Turn off the cruise control and take time to check in with people. How are they really feeling? How did that decision truly impact their workload and how they do things? Not every decision is going to be popular, but understanding how you are impacting people allows you to make adjustments and address problems before they grow out of control.
Kevin Johnson, CPA is the current Director of Internal Audit of North America for International Paper. He has over 25 years of progressive leadership roles throughout his career. Kevin has demonstrated exceptional leadership abilities with the capacity to build, train and mentor highly productive financial, audit, and operational teams. He is a change agent with outstanding strategic vision, leadership, communication, and organizational skills, which have proven to be critical assets in developing a positive work environment, managing people, and exceeding company goals.

Prior to joining International Paper, Kevin was the Chief Audit Executive at Dow Corning. Kevin has held roles of CFO, Chief Accounting Officer, and Corporate Controller for a number of private and public companies.

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