

#18: Losing Your Talent? By Patricia Wheeler

We hear so much these days about best practices for talent retention. Many managers still think attracting and keeping the best talent is driven by salary and benefits. Not so, for the most part, the research says. Interviewing 60,000 people over twenty years, the Saratoga Institute found the most frequently cited reason for leaving a job was difficulty with an immediate supervisor. In a 2003 study of 28,000 former healthcare workers, the communications firm J. Walter Thompson found that more employees leave because of bad managers than for any other single, controllable reason.

I had a powerful reminder of this last month when Jim, a former client, called in a panic, concerned he had made the wrong career decision. Jim is a talented senior attorney within a highly technical industry. He had accepted a position offering a substantial salary increase, which would involve relocating his family. He was excited about the prospect of joining a highly visible organization, a recognized leader within his field, and his family was already packing for the move.

Jim told me on the call that he was concerned about the chemistry between himself and his manager. In his profession, Jim is known as an industry expert, highly skilled at working independently and effectively. He's self aware and a moderately good team player. He kept having the nagging feeling that something was amiss in his new position. As he talked with his new manager since accepting the offer, he became increasingly worried about having too little autonomy and control in his new position and that his new boss was a micromanager.

I suggested that he call his new boss, share his concerns, and determine the degree that they could work collaboratively with one another. Jim has spent a great deal of time honing his executive presence and has a good ability to deal constructively with difficult issues. Nevertheless, Jim was concerned about this conversation and practiced this with me in advance of calling his boss. I felt confident that he would convey his concerns in a style that would advance their relationship.

Jim called me back with the news that the conversation had been disastrous. His suspicions were confirmed. Not only was his boss a micromanager, the situation was worse than he thought. The manager, Paul, made it clear that every decision Jim made would have to pass through him, not just at the outset but as ongoing policy. Paul's attitude, he said, had been dismissive, bordering on rude. And he did not convey back to Jim the pressures and stressors that were making him anxious and driving his felt need to control. Paradoxically, Jim's experience and independence would have helped Paul with this complex job. But under stress, Paul returned to his default setting – top down and controlling.

Additionally, Jim found that there was little flexibility in personal time off which would make the family's move more problematic. Jim was at a difficult crossroads. He had already left his previous job and the moving van was on its way.

The next call came from Jim's wife. "Please tell Jim not to take the job," she implored. "I know that he will be miserable working for Paul, and no amount of money is worth that kind of misery. I'll support the family for a while and we'll stay here. Life is too short to be unhappy."

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So what's the net result here? A leading organization missed out on the chance to land a great performer. I'll bet the new company's senior leadership will never know why this talented professional did not join their team. Who knows how many gifted employees they may lose to poor leadership? Paul may be confused about what happened as well. As a leader, he may not be adequately self-aware to notice when he resorts to pressure-driven behavior. He needs to consistently act on the knowledge that highly trained, motivated professionals need ample autonomy and flexibility to perform at their best. And this requires clear dialogue to determine expectations, roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, and degrees of autonomy and empowerment.

What keeps talented people within an organization? Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans, in their survey of over 12,000 workers, found that providing challenging assignments, great co-workers, and opportunities for learning and development were ranked as more important to retention than finances. In my experience coaching smart, highly trained individuals, I find time and time again that talented contributors who feel valued and respected by their leaders, particularly their direct manager, are less likely to leave an organization even when offered a more financially lucrative package.

So as you think about leadership in your organization....both your own style and the style of the managers who report to you....ask yourself how well you and your reports measure up to the challenge of providing employees with the type of leadership that drives talent retention and employee engagement. If the question is how to attract, keep and develop smart and committed people, the answer is largely about how consciously they are managed, trusted, developed and empowered.

Life is too short to be miserable, and talented contributors know this. Be self-aware and rise to the leadership challenge or risk losing them.

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