

RETAIN AND GAIN

EMPLOYEE RETENTION IN THE NON-PROFIT SECTOR

By Lisa Taylor

“Large organizations can provide careers. Agencies of our size can provide only provide jobs.” This sentiment, heard in various flavours, from non-profit leaders highlights a critical myth that holds organizations back from retaining top talent.

Non-profit organizations in Canada, like small businesses, tend to be relatively flat. Indeed, many non-profits and charities employ less than 20 staff. With limited upward mobility, there is a perception that jobs within the sector are a good starting or temporary stopping ground, places to spend up to a few years, but not destinations that provide fulsome, satisfying careers.

This myth that small, flat organizations cannot provide rich and robust careers is damaging and costly. It normalizes turnover instead of challenging leadership to focus on the one sure-fire way to retain staff, better career management.

Many believe that loyalty and retention hinges on compensation and title. However, according to Gallup Research, employees

who get the opportunity to continually develop are twice as likely to say they will spend their career with their organization. New Canadian research conducted by Challenge Factory in 2017 found that up to 78 per cent of employees working in small organizations would remain with their current employer if they could see a future for their career. Yet managers, unaware of what employees are really looking for, believe they cannot provide what is needed to ensure long-term engagement.

It seems there is a bit of a stand-off. Leaders are looking for evidence that their staff might stay with them for the long-term, while employees are listening for cues that the organization understands how to help them grow and develop. In the absence of good, meaningful, future-focused career conversations, each party is likely to assume the other is not interested in long-term mutual success. Employers cut back on developing staff (why help them grow if that's going to cause them to leave?) and staff start looking elsewhere (why stay if I have no future here?).

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EXERCISE CAREER DEVELOPMENT SKILLS DAILY

Career development is a hidden field of professional practice. It is not necessarily covered in human resources or leadership courses. Often, leaders and managers find themselves in career conversations with staff armed only with personal experiences and anecdotes to draw upon. In fact, there are a variety of proven tools, approaches and techniques that can turn a friendly, well-intended conversation into a meaningful alignment of personal, professional and organizational goals.

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Eighty-eight percent of executive directors indicated that they felt unprepared to provide career development opportunities for their staff. Since no one enjoys feeling unprepared, the tendency is to avoid initiating career conversations at all. However, discussing employee careers need not be a Pandora's Box.

As a first step, managers can consider how to normalize career conversations, so they do not feel like major milestones and instead become part of everyday work. Consider having 10-minute "no-agenda" check-ins with your staff. Call them or grab a coffee and let them guide the conversation on any topic they want to focus on. Some may start with something personal. Others may talk about a work project or team member. Over time, regular, brief check-ins spaced several weeks apart will ensure stronger relationships, deeper mutual awareness and meaningful opportunities to enhance engagement.

DEMONSTRATE CAREER CREATIVITY

Salary and title are easy elements to focus on when discussing career advancement and retention strategies. Although most studies show that they alone are not enough to keep people in jobs that lack opportunities to feel valued and growing. Often, managers feel they lack options to enhance employee engagement. The truth is, every organization regardless of size, budget and sector can get creative in how they help employees manage and grow in their careers.

A study by the University of North Carolina noted that employees of all generations have the same top three basic needs that they look to their employer to help them satisfy. They want 1) opportunities to learn and develop, 2) an ability to integrate work and life,



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and 3) to be treated fairly. With a little creativity all these conditions can be met or exceeded.

Managers should consider what career growth means for each individual employee. Some will value opportunities to learn a new skill related to their job. Others may value spending a few hours working in a different part of the organization. For some, representing the organization in public may be a great reward, while others may prefer being assigned a research project that aligns with this year's goals. Note that none of these activities are costly, nor do they require a change in title. These activities invigorate employees by exposing them to something new. They turn into retention and career growth initiatives when managers help employees be intentional ahead of time about what they hope to learn from the experience; reflective during the activity to identify what they like, don't like and are surprised by; and future-focused in a debriefing discussion (perhaps during the next 10-minute check-in) to identify how they can share what they've learned and what they want to learn next to keep growing.

BE CAREER COURAGEOUS

Non-profit leaders know that employee turn-over is costly. In the coming years, competition for key talent will only increase. Leaders and managers need to know that having regular, meaningful career conversations supported by ongoing opportunities to learn and develop is the secret antidote for retention challenges. If these types of discussions and activities aren't already part of an organization's culture, it can be challenging to get started. It feels risky with outcomes that may be uncertain.

A little bit of courage to try something new often results in significant, immediate results. The key is to get started. ■

Lisa Taylor is president of Challenge Factory and the centreforcareerinnovation.ca.