

Five Sure-Fire Ways to Drive Good Employees Away

By Eileen McDargh CSP, CPAE



With the pending severe worker drain prompted by boomers in full or partial retirement, keeping good employees has never been more critical. The most significant word in retention, however, is "engagement". Too many workers are present but their imagination, spirit and creativity have departed out the door with disillusion.

Consider these top five actions that pull the plug on employee energy:

1. Be a know-it-all and discount the input of others.

A new senior level manager was brought into an organization.

When department heads met with him, he proclaimed "lower cost, higher quality, more sales". He asked for their input and then immediately dismissed whatever they said. The fact that he had never worked in this particular industry had already prompted skepticism. The department heads, whose support and knowledge are critical for a turnaround, have departed in droves while those who are staying just shrug their shoulders and say they'll hunker down until they find something else.

2. Never admit mistakes.

The worn phrase from the old movie Love Story proclaimed, "Loves means never having to say you're sorry." As wrong as that advice is for intimate relationships, it is just as stupid in business. When ego and arrogance replace the realities of a decision, employees watch in dismay. The operating plan becomes mired in finding ways to justify action rather than admitting error and looking for a new, more promising direction. The cost overruns on building a large golf course were huge because the senior manager refused the input of his department heads and then spent thousands trying to cover up design flaws.

3. Act first and think later.

The ready, fire, aim approach of shoot-from-the-hip-and-think-later is all too common in our 24/7, do-it-now world. The results can be disastrous - particularly if the vehicle for action is e-mail. E-mail now stands for escalation and error. The person who blasts off a response without carefully considering the tone and the names on the distribution list can find himself spending time and energy undoing collateral damage. The more critical the relationship and/or the outcome of the action, the greater wisdom is in carefully measured actions and more likely than not, face-to-face conversation.

4. Create an inner circle that thinks alike.

Howell Raines, executive editor of the NY TIMES, was the subject of a 17,000-word article that appeared in the NEW YORKER on June 6, 2002. It was a brutal expose, painting a documented story of him as an arrogant bully who played favorites, listened only to a few people and pummeled far too many. When folks outside of his inner circle tried to tell him their concerns regarding Jayson Blair, the now infamous fabricator of new stories, Raines ignored them. His resignation from the NY TIMES speaks to the danger of that inner circle.

The higher the stakes, the more critical it is to have input from people with various points of view and different ways of responding to a situation. If a CEO puts people around her who merely parrot her beliefs, the organization is being led by lemmings. And if the inner circle is of a ready-fire-aim mentality, there's no caution in action. If the inner circle mirrors a slow, all-the-facts-first mentality, the organization might miss critical opportunities and be too slow to respond to a changing marketplace. Organizations should consider using assessments in order to understand the behavioral diversity of the team.

5. Say one thing and do another.

A high-tech manufacturing company in Southern California announced significant layoffs because of poor performance. Every budget item was to be scrutinized. The following weekend, the CEO took the top management team away to the Ritz Carlton in Monarch Beach so they could ponder these new realities. Care to guess how fast the employees got wind of this "cost-saving" move? Or how about the professional services firm that proclaimed mandatory attendance and then repeatedly ignored a senior consultant who only showed up when he "felt like it".

If you want to model truth and trust, ask the people around you how often you engage in these behaviors. And if you are not happy with the answers, DO something different. You might also need to bring in an external coach to help you with the process.

The results: you win and the organization wins.

About the author:

Eileen McDargh's wisdom, good humor, and contagious energy helps individuals and organizations create great work and satisfying relationships. More information about Eileen is available at www.EileenMcDargh.com

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