

Retain Your Top Talent By Dealing With Early Warning Signals

By Robert Gilfoyle, OTI Performance Inc.

There is a simple and inexpensive technique that will help you retain your best employees. Let me tell you a story that will explain it for you.

I was presenting to the partners of a successful business law practice on how to retain their best legal talent. After the session a partner approached me privately for my thoughts on a situation she was dealing with. She told me that one of her best senior associates had “started to behave somewhat out of character”. The associate had always shown high levels of commitment, consistently producing excellent work for clients and in many ways setting the standard for his colleagues. He was widely recognized as having partnership potential. However, recently the partner had noticed a difference in attitude. Instead of displaying his usual enthusiasm he seemed apathetic, he had started to complain, something he had never been known for, and there had been a marked drop in productivity. I immediately noticed that the partner had described three of the most common ‘early warning signals’ for someone who may be thinking about leaving their firm.

We arranged to discuss the situation further and it transpired that there were further signs that the associate may be investigating other opportunities. There had been a sudden increase in the number of personal telephone calls, and the amount of sick leave. Clearly there was something going on and the partner wanted suggestions on what could be done about it. We decided that it made sense to talk with the associate as soon as possible, and I shared an approach that has proved useful in these situations and will work whatever kind of business you are in. Here it is. Arrange to meet privately with the employee and openly discuss their possible concerns. Use the steps below to guide the discussion:

- Thank the employee for meeting with you and explain the purpose of the meeting.
- Refer tactfully to the early warning signals and probe to determine if they represent a deeper concern.
- Summarize the response from the employee and, if necessary, ask additional questions to clarify concerns.
- Ask for and suggest ideas for addressing concerns.
- Decide what actions each of you will take to address the concern(s), and set a follow-up date.
- Thank the employee for being candid, and let them know how much you value their contribution.

“Yes, but could I be opening a proverbial ‘can of worms’ by using this approach?” You

may be asking. Perhaps, but let's consider the alternative i.e. doing nothing. In our example, in the short term there is a good chance that the associate discontent will grow, after all nothing is being done to improve the situation. This growing discontent would affect the quality of work produced and consequently impact client satisfaction. There is also the possibility that the discontent could spread to other team members and even that business development opportunities may be missed.

In the long term, if the associate disengages completely and leaves, the consequences become serious. All that intellectual capital, investment in his development and client knowledge has just left the practice and is moving to a rival firm! How are the clients going to feel about the situation, especially given that continuity of service is important to them? And then there's the financial hit...depending on what you include, the cost to the practice could be somewhere between two and four times the associates total annual compensation package.

The lesson here is, don't ignore early warning signals and hope they will go away. You can't afford to and it's far too risky. Take the bull by the horns and address the situation tactfully, professionally and *quickly*.

Here's how the story ends. After some gentle and tactful questioning by the partner the associate revealed that he was feeling de-motivated because his efforts didn't seem to be noticed or appreciated. At least, no one had ever taken the time to thank him for going the extra mile on so many occasions. He was beginning to wonder if it was worth putting in the extra time and effort, especially as he had a young family that he didn't get to see as much as he would like. This came as a complete surprise to the partner as she had always assumed he knew she was very appreciative, and that's why she had never said anything to that effect. The partner re-assured him about his value to the firm, and resolved to be more supportive in future. By opening up communications she had prevented the situation getting any worse, and now knew what to do to get things back on track.

In case you're wondering, feeling un-appreciated is one of the top five reasons people decide to leave an organization.

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