

Find out what makes your people tick: Ask the right questions

Editor's note: To inquire about submitting a Strategies column, contact Managing Editor Mark Reilly at (612) 288-2110 or mreilly@bizjournals.com.

Business owners know it takes all kinds of managers to run a successful company. Different personalities, different opinions, different cultures. The different experiences each brings to the table are often key to business success. So why is it that so many business leaders assume that all star players are motivated solely by money and career advancement?

When it comes to retaining valued employees, there is no "magic bullet." My firm recently analyzed the results of nearly 1,500 personal history data questionnaires gathered during our corporate assessment and coaching efforts undertaken over the past three years. These ef-



Strategies

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forts were conducted across multiple industries and at all levels of the leadership pipeline. The questionnaires sought rankings for the personal importance of various workplace attributes such as challenging work content, sense of accomplishment, compensation, creativity and advancement.

One of the first things apparent was the startling difference between men and women in the importance placed on "financial and career prospects," a term coupling the rankings assigned to having advancement opportunities and the chance to earn high compensation. Regardless of leadership level, males were much more likely to place greater importance on this area than their female colleagues. For their part, women were much more likely than men to place higher importance on being recognized at work and gaining a reputation for expertise.

Does this mean that women aren't interested in raises and promotions? Does it mean that as long as you "show men the money," you don't need to recognize their important contributions

to corporate success? The answer is no on both counts. It simply means that financial and career prospects for women, and recognition by peers for men, aren't first on their respective lists.

What does this mean for the small-business owner working to keep key players of both genders engaged and committed? Based on the data we've analyzed, we'd offer the following:

- **Don't assume you know what motivates a person professionally.** You need to ask them. For example, it is important to determine whether women view expertise as an end in itself, or as a means to an end — i.e., gaining advancement and greater financial reward.

- **Judge promotions on an individual's current performance as well as their potential and readiness to fill the new role** — not just on how obvious they're being about their desire to advance.

- **Help employees make the right choices for their own particular goals and aspirations.** We found that women in particular will often develop deep expertise in a certain niche area valuable to their employer. In some cases, these individuals cultivate such expertise solely because they get fulfillment from being seen as an "expert" in a certain area and being asked for related input into important company decisions. In other cases, however, such specialization is undertaken as a way to stand out as a high achiever suitable for promotion. In the latter situation, such specialization is an inefficient means to the desired end, and can actually limit chances for advancement on the management track. Unless an organization has a parallel technical career track, deep expertise can only get you so far.

Smart employers assist their star players in making the right decisions for the desired career track. They do this by asking questions and listening not only to what employees say they want, but also exploring why they want it. An employee may say that they want to be an expert in a certain area. But by asking why, an employer may be able to offer a more direct path to the individual's career goal.

- **Financial and career prospects are just one of many potential motivators that can be used to keep key players from jumping ship.** Examples of alternative motivators include opportunities for new learning, flexible scheduling

and autonomy in accomplishing a desired corporate outcome.

- **Recognize the experts in your organization.** Expertise is hard-won, and is easily lost if it's not perceived by the expert as being valuable to management. Such recognition also serves to motivate others. One of the most effective ways to recognize expertise is to have a technical career track as well as the typical management track. This way, pivotal employees with no desire to manage don't hit a dead-end with an organization and take their expertise along with them when they move to greener pastures.

- **Consider programs and processes that will help you identify high-potential employees.** We define a high-potential employee as an individual who would excel at a job two levels above their current position. Offer these future key players targeted development opportunities to help them prepare for the next level.

- **Start early.** The fight to attract and retain star talent is fierce, and losing the fight could have catastrophic impact on your bottom line. Put a people strategy in place to keep consistent flow in your "leadership pipeline" — all the way from front-line leaders to the C-suite.

While the difference in value men and women assign to financial and career prospects was the most obvious item revealed by our research, we identified several others that are just as intriguing, such as the relative value of work-life balance, service to the community, recognition, and work style. And the differences don't show up only between the sexes. Responses vary as well across age, leadership level and culture. As we continue our analysis, we believe we'll find additional insight into the work styles of various management employees, and will be able to identify key traits that serve to advance career goals as well as hold people back.

In the meantime, we wish you luck in defining just what it is that makes each of your individual employees tick.

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