

## **Retaining Talent through Defined Work Expectations**

**By Kate Greene, SPHR**

It used to be that when employees accepted a job, they could expect to work for the company for until they were ready to retire.

It used to be that when companies hired someone they could expect loyalty and hard work from that employee until retirement.

In today's business climate of rapid change and uncertainty, employees understand that finding a job with "security" is less and less likely. If hard work and loyalty no longer earn a "job for life" what does a talented employee get? If economic realities prevent employers from guaranteeing jobs, how can companies determine what to offer instead of security?

Successful businesses in 2002 are managing this shift in the workplace by clarifying expectations on both sides of the employee-employer relationship. These businesses hold on to talented employees by finding out what is important to employees. Research has shown that the process of communicating employer expectations and understanding employee expectations is one that clearly links to reduced turnover, increased productivity and satisfaction.

### **Understanding Employee Expectations**

It takes time, effort and trust to clearly organize and express expectations. After all, if an employee feels their work is not important, then why would their goals or attitude toward work be important?

Whether spoken or unspoken, employee job expectations have huge impact on feelings, job behaviors and attitudes towards work. Additionally, research has shown that clearly defined, well-communicated expectations result in greater job satisfaction and success when compared to employees whose expectations remain unspoken. Satisfied employees work harder and stay on the job longer.

The Challenge: Many employees may not fully understand what they expect at work, and even if they do they may most likely have not fully communicated it to their employer. This is especially true of people new to the workforce. In my own experience, when employees are asked about their job expectations they talk about the work environment,

ability to make decisions, recognition and opportunities to grow professionally. Getting a paycheck is expected; employers that go beyond just an hourly rate get commitment.

Being able to draw out employee expectations is a newly required skill of successful managers. I recommend asking, both new and current employees. Ask new and current employees what they expect on the job. What is important to them? What part of the job do they enjoy? What have they learned on the job over the last 90 days? Talk about the future.

Because the employer-employee relationship is more dynamic and ambiguous, a variety of tools have been developed to help. 360 feedback surveys are very helpful for those in leadership roles to learn how they are doing at providing clear direction and communication. Behavioral Profiles are excellent for raising employee self-awareness and honing communication skills with co-workers and customers. Employee surveys on an individual and company wide level open the dialogue between employer-employees in a constructive way.

### **Communicating Employer Expectations**

While managers have a new responsibility for clarifying employee expectations, clear employer expectations and standards continue to be paramount in successful organizations.

Company performance expectations are established in a variety of ways, including well-written company handbooks, clear job descriptions, on-the-job training that gives the employee a chance to learn how, when and what to do on the job.

Performance expectations are not new concept. Every manager has work schedules, rules and job standards that need to be met for business to run smoothly and profitably. Employees look to company leaders to set direction, and are disappointed when supervisors do not fairly enforce rules and policy across the organization. I have never seen a workplace where failure to address non-performing employees was appreciated by co-workers.

The most important factor in setting company expectations comes back to ongoing dialogue from the direct supervisor. Guidance, feedback and encouragement from a supervisor regarding job performance have more to do with actual performance than any corporate policy.

In Northern Michigan we have witnessed employers cutting back in slowed economy and NY terrorist tragedy. The unspoken agreement of security in exchange for loyalty is no longer realistic. “Work hard and you’ll always have a job here” has been replaced by shifting economic realities. Successful employers ask questions to discover what their employees value and expect from their work. Companies that talk with employees about these issues are more likely to retain talented employees and reap the rewards of increased productivity and employee commitment.

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