



When Times are Tough, Go Wii Bowling

4 Keys to Career Satisfaction and Employee Retention

By Bonnie Low-Kramen

The economic news of 2008 created a whole new ballgame in the American workplace. Nothing drove home the reality of the recession harder than the cold newsflash in many companies: "Annual holiday party cancelled due to the economy." The Associated Press further announced that workers should not expect holiday gifts because of cutbacks.

The word transmitted over e-mail messages between workers, the story made headlines around the country, and morale and confidence fell another notch or two. The message sent: This is serious if Christmas gets the axe.

Yet another headline also caught our attention. Days after the election, President-elect Barack Obama authorized a bonus of a month's salary to be distributed from the campaign's surplus funds to his staff. Staffers also got to keep their laptop computers and BlackBerrys as gifts. The message delivered: Your efforts are respected, valued, and we want to show our appreciation in a tangible and meaningful way. The result is a group of loyal and motivated people willing to go above and beyond on a consistent basis.

Mission accomplished. A win-win situation for all.

Despite our tough times, Mr. Obama succeeded in setting a positive expectation that commitment and dedication will be rewarded. However, the rewards do not always have to be tangible in order to have the desired result.

This example highlights the four keys to career satisfaction that are critical to retaining staff.

1. Respect from manager and co-workers
2. Appreciation by the manager and the company
3. Fair compensation
4. A sense of value and worth to the company

Recognize Worker Concerns

Given the precarious nature of our economy, it is important for executives and managers to note that they are not the only ones worrying about the state of their companies. Stressed-out staffers who are preoccupied with job security and lack of information, are devouring valuable time, energy, resources, and productivity with these distractions. Communication is key to dealing with and retaining the staff. Meetings and regular e-mail letters keeping staff informed of the latest news will minimize rumors and wasted time.

Protecting and retaining existing staff is critical to moving forward into 2009 and beyond. After all, it costs an average of \$10K-\$30K to replace one employee. Because the dire economic news has become commonplace, friends meet and congratulate one another on still having a job. The discomfort is palpable, pervasive, and can be unnerving.

No-Cost, Low-Cost Strategies

Who is untouched by this new reality? No one. Savvy HR managers will be responsive to this reality with no-cost and low-cost strategies to boost employee morale and productivity. Here are some examples.

1. Organize “Lunch and Learn” seminars on timely topics led by in-house staff. For example, sessions on finances and stress management and insurance coverage are three popular topics.
2. Offer flexibility on schedule. Allow an employee to work at home for a few hours in exchange for leaving early to attend a child’s event or deal with a family member. A four-day workweek saves money and fuel and is an enormous boost to morale.
3. A growing trend is for companies to have a “celebration manager” or “cheer officer” who organizes social events among the employees such as a monthly picnic lunch on the company lawn. Microsoft has “morale budgets,” funds which pay for popcorn making machines and regular social events such as movie screenings. An advertising agency in New York City created a game room and the staff and managers play Wii video games and hold tournaments before and after work hours. These activities build an all-important sense of team and relieve stress.
4. Institute a casual dress code, which saves money and is more comfortable for the employee. This perk makes a difference even if it is only one day per week.
5. Offer free soda, coffee and snacks as a low-cost benefit that keeps staff happy, on the job, and able to save money.
6. Provide a “concierge-style” benefit without breaking the bank. Keep staff productive and in the office by providing an errand-runner — a quasi-personal assistant who will pick up dry cleaning, lunch, prescriptions and gifts. To keep the

cost down, you may be able to find local college students who are looking to earn extra cash. The message: The staff's time and energy is valuable and it is a good decision to protect them.

After a Layoff

When the dust settles after layoffs and cutbacks, it is worth taking the time to focus on the remaining staff to understand what new problems and needs exist. One of their fears is understandable. Will they be next? Staff should not learn about the fate of the company and thus, their own futures, from the evening news. These problems don't happen in a vacuum and staff can become disoriented and even traumatized from the stress. Give your staff a voice. If in doubt about what steps need to be taken in the aftermath of downsizing, create a survey to ask those questions and the staff will give you the answers.

Conclusion

Your remaining staff is there for a reason. They are providing a crucial function and are excellent at what they do or they wouldn't be there. It is important to acknowledge, respect and appreciate them as individuals, now more than ever. Hiring smart and retaining them smarter is very good business. And whatever you do, don't cancel Christmas.

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