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Bridging the Credibility Gap

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To retain top talent, organizations need to start talking to their employees. When left in the dark, people draw conclusions which tend to be worse than reality. HR leaders should also be aware of uncharacteristic behavior by their managers, which often indicates high levels of stress.

As the economy begins to show signs of life, companies across the board report a new challenge: Top talent is becoming slippery.

Top-tier employees are suddenly finding notes in their in-boxes and LinkedIn profiles from headhunters. For many companies, this problem of a rebounding job market is compounded by a lack of revenue, leaving few financial incentives available to induce these employees to stay put.

So if you're sweating over the possibility of losing the very employees that top management made a point not to let go during workforce cuts, you're not alone.

While there's no doubt that lack of financial incentive plays a role in the willingness of employees to jump ship, there are deeper issues that companies must address. Stress, burnout, disengagement and a host of other problems are symptomatic of one core issue that needs to be addressed above all: Trust.

The Credibility Gap

Trust issues are often elusive because they largely go unspoken. However, keep in mind that, over the past two years, valued employees have seen co-workers let go right and left, saw unfulfilled promises, observed inconsistent behavior and been forced to deal with the effects of short-sighted decision-making.

It should come as no surprise that many no longer trust leadership. Employers who want to hang on to these workers must address this credibility gap.

Numerous studies have shown a correlation between trust and a host of performance indicators, including retention.

In a 2008 study, *Work Engagement and its Relationship with State and Trait Trust: A Conceptual Analysis,* Aamir Ali Chughtai and Finian Buckley suggested that trust positively correlates with workplace engagement and cited evidence for the notion that trust positively affects turnover intentions.

And if, as is suggested, lack of engagement is an indicator of a breakdown in trust, the problem may be widespread, as a 2010 study by Right Management entitled *Employee Engagement: Maximizing Organizational Performance* found that 50 percent of employees in organizations with 50-plus workers identify themselves as completely disengaged.

Rebuilding Trust with Candid Communication

The studies by both Chughtai and Buckley and Right Management assert that, among other factors, forthright communication is key to building trust.

Put simply, organizations need to start talking to their employees. When left in the dark, people draw conclusions that tend to be worse than reality. Leaders, therefore, need to candidly explain the current state of affairs and the strategy for weathering the next few years.

Recently we've seen companies achieve success by holding "summits" to explain to every level of talent strategic plans, realistic expectations, goals and reasons behind actions.

However, as talking is only a portion of the communication spectrum, it's equally important to behave in ways that open the lines of communication and therefore build trust.

Surprisingly, we've found that many behaviors commonly exhibited by leaders tend to break down trust.

Utilizing constructs based on the Fundamental Interpersonal Relations Orientation model, which identifies fundamental interpersonal needs that drive behavior, we've found that it's not uncommon for senior managers to possess high "expressed" needs for inclusion, but low "wanted" needs.

According to the theory, the extent to which a person will initiate certain behaviors is termed as expressed, while the extent to which they prefer to be a recipient of those behaviors is wanted. For example, if someone craves affection, yet is fairly unaffectionate themselves, they could be termed as having a low expressed and high wanted need for affection.

So managers may, for example, very actively invite their employees to meetings or social gatherings. However, when asked by their employees to attend such gatherings, they often don't show up. Even worse, sometimes they don't show up for their own events.

Such behavior strongly tends to break down trust -- particularly in this economy. As simple as it may sound, just showing up to meetings and company parties goes a long way toward building trust because it shows that you care.

Additionally, managers possessing a low expressed and high wanted need for "affection" often prompt employees to open up about personal or work-related things, but fail to reciprocate. Getting someone to open up and then failing to demonstrate openness in return tends to break down trust, ironically making it less likely that they'll open up again.

While there are boundaries when it comes to managers opening up to employees, expressing openness on a personal level -- and therefore willingness toward a degree of mutual vulnerability -- is a highly effective way to build trust.

Also, consider a manager with high expressed and low wanted needs for "control," which may be exhibited in a tendency to hoard work. Failure to delegate often sends a message to employees that you don't trust them. Delegation, on the other hand, is, in and of itself, an expression of trust -- a necessary step in building mutual trust.

Building Trust by Showing Appreciation

Both studies also identified employee appreciation as key to building trust. Beyond praise, however, find out what actually motivates your employees and let them work on the kinds of things they enjoy. Additionally, we've found that small, yet meaningful, perks such as paying for dinner and cab rides for employees who work late, half days, summer Fridays, professional-development opportunities and time off for personal development go a long way.

A perhaps even more meaningful way to show appreciation involves identifying your employees' core needs/issues and figuring out ways to meet those needs.

In very few areas is this more impactful than stress management. Identify employee stressors and, on an individual basis, do what you can to relieve them, and your employees will begin to see reason to trust you.

Using what is known as "Grip" theory -- a construct for addressing stress responses based on the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator instrument -- we've learned that both signs of stress and stressors vary greatly by personality type, and aren't always obvious.

When we're "in the grip" of stress -- a phrase coined by clinical psychologist Naomi L. Quenk to describe the feeling of being "beside ourselves" -- we're not operating from the aspects of our personality that are most practiced and familiar to us.

As such, our behavior can be clumsy and unpredictable. Furthermore, grip-level stress can lead to sub-par performance, as we tend to work harder and work longer hours but are less effective because we're using preferences and functions where we are less fluent.

For example, someone with a preference for "extroversion" and "thinking" might deal with the stress of company upheaval with what may be perceived as cool detachment and efficient determination.

Such unusual calmness in the midst of the storm, however, may be the sign of tremendous inner turmoil, and an employee close to their breaking point. For such an individual, stressors may include lack of control over time and tasks, a disorganized environment and frequent interruptions.

Alternatively, someone with a preference for "introversion" and "thinking" may react to criticism or hostility with paranoia. An otherwise self-assured employee may begin to believe that no one likes them, and even express these feelings to co-workers.

However -- particularly if this is not usual behavior for this person -- it may once again be a sign that he or she is stressed to their breaking point. For such an individual, typical stressors may include working under strict regulations, being dependent on others for work results, and too little time alone.

By taking care to identify these stressors and offering workplace concessions that relieve them, leaders may demonstrate true appreciation for the employee's contribution and make great strides toward building trust.

By the same token, leaders need to be aware of how the "grip" phenomenon may affect their own behavior in ways that break down their teams' trust in them.

For example, an executive normally heralded for an open communication style may become withdrawn; a manager who is consistently reasonable may seem irrational or overly emotional; or an executive who provides autonomy for employees may become a micromanager.

When this happens, the team becomes confused by this uncharacteristic behavior and trust breaks down. By addressing their own stress reactions, leaders can offer a more consistent presentation, increasing their teams' trust in their judgment.

These varied tactics have one thing in common: they demonstrate that the employer is dedicated to the well-being of the employee -- an indispensable component in rebuilding trust.

Barring extraordinary circumstances, it's safe to assume that your company can't take for granted that its employees believe their best interests are a top concern for management. If you want to retain these valued workers, you need to show them why they should believe it.

For many organizations, this will only be accomplished when leaders quit worrying about whether time and money spent on employees yields direct ROI -- at this point, the ROI is that top-tier employees don't quit.

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