

How to keep talented employees motivated in tough times

This month, we are launching a new leadership-advice column, letting our readers ask questions of Dean Newlund, president of Mission Facilitators International. Newlund created this month's program, 30 days to becoming a better leader.

QUESTION:

What tips or suggestions do you have for keeping highly talented and creative employees motivated and energized during these tough economic times?

— *Nachie Marquez, communications and public-affairs director, city of Chandler*

ANSWER: Nachie, you are not alone in asking this question. Across the country, employees are tired of doing more work with fewer resources and little or no recognition. Burnout is the new normal. More than half of those surveyed by DDI, a talent-management firm, said their careers are stagnant and that they plan to look for another job when the economy improves. These same employees are more than twice as likely to move to another company if given the opportunity. The message is clear: Not now, but soon, retention will be a real problem. Until then we have a sick patient: the American worker. The treatment plan:

- ▶ Give challenging assignments.
- ▶ Develop new skills.
- ▶ Provide recognition.
- ▶ Clarify how individual jobs connect to the objectives of the organization.
- ▶ And, when the economy returns, provide advancement opportunities.

For you and your team, the solutions are slightly different. As ambassadors for your community who often speak for local officials and partner with small businesses, your team I suspect already feels vitally connected to the mission and strategies of the city of Chandler. However, your team must feel run-down by too much work and being the bearer of bad news.

Here are a few low-budget tips:

- ▶ Set aside time during weekly meetings for each person to report good news, personal or work-related. This should break the pattern that meetings are always about hearing bad news.
- ▶ Each month do something fun to celebrate a recent success. Grab an ice-cream cone and go to the local park. Catch a movie, take in a museum. Assign a team of two to come up with the activity for the next month. This will create friendly competition, and teams will want to outdo the others with the most fun activity.

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- ▶ Create a mentor program. List all skills found in the team. Match people's desires to learn a new skill with mentors who possess those skills. This type of cross-training should help prepare people for new jobs when they become available. Also, the one-on-one support will help energize the team culture.
- ▶ During planning meetings, encourage team members to image a future that is engaging, challenging and fulfilling. Reward innovation, risk-taking and full participation. Develop short-, medium- and long-term goals. Ensure follow-through by creating small task forces.

Nachie, when the future is uncertain, the news we're hearing is bad and training funds are scarce, the best option is to rely more on team members: Celebrate success, do something fun, develop new skills and plan for a brighter future. The economy will rebound. The question for all of us isn't just will we be ready, but will we stay fully engaged until it does? ■

