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CARE's WorkLife Solutions Weekly Wire

How to Retain Your Top Achievers

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You can explore more website resources by clicking on the World Icon and entering your unique company password. The website offers close to 100 online skill Builder Trainings on various topics and over 100 Ready Docs. (If you do not have a unique company password, please contact CARE's WorkLife Solutions and request a temporary password).

Paying attention to your employees' career development pays off in their commitment.

Are you worried about keeping your top performers? You should be—especially if you haven't been talking with them about where their careers are headed.

Your most valuable employees—the high achievers who require low maintenance—are prime targets for recruiters.

They'll become even more attractive as the job market rebounds. These are the very folks who are most marketable to other employers, and you'll feel the pinch if you haven't created a reason for them to stay.

To avoid losing the people you need most, make sure your management routine includes discussing career development with your employees.

Effective managers make it a point to guide and support employees in attaining career goals. This can be done in settings as simple as informal discussions. Practiced consistently, this actually makes a manager's job easier—a little time invested in coaching employees is a lot less costly than managing short-handed.

Let's consider a hypothetical employee, based on many cases I've seen as a career advisor. I'll call him "Jack." A highly skilled software engineer and a top performer, Jack is self-motivated, a good problem solver and an independent worker. Before the economy slowed, recruiters regularly tempted him with interesting software challenges, more money, faster career growth. Now they're calling again.

A few weeks ago, a recruiter contacted Jack about a position with a higher salary. After a series of interviews, Jack received a generous offer.

Jack mulled over his choices. When it came right down to it, money wasn't the issue for Jack; it was the future of his career. The new company was wooing him with new career options, while his own employer was silent.

Approaching his manager to ask about future career possibilities, Jack was rebuffed. His boss angrily interpreted Jack's actions as a sign of disloyalty. Rather than help him sort out his career concerns, she launched her response with, "After all I've done for you..."

The boss's reaction provided the impetus Jack needed. He accepted the new position.

The time and money that it took to find a replacement for Jack cost the manager much more than if she'd been discussing Jack's career goals with him all along. Had his manager listened closely enough, she would have heard Jack's uncertainty about leaving, and she could have discussed ways to help him with career planning. All Jack needed was a good reason to stay.

If you haven't been communicating with your employees about their career development—or if you'd like to try some new ways of doing so—here are some tips to help you open the lines of communication:

Conduct professional development inventories for each of your people. What do you know about their short-term and long-term goals? What do they see as their next move in the company? What strengths would they like to build on? If you don't know the answers, these questions could be good starting points for your discussions.

Identify important tools and resources for professional development and career management. What internal and external training courses are available? Is tuition reimbursement an option? If so, how does it work? What can you find out about job descriptions, qualifications, and requirements? Does your company maintain a database of skills and competencies needed for specific jobs? Are there committees, task forces and other groups that could help employees grow professionally?

List development possibilities in your area. Look for ways to build on people's strengths by adding new tasks or challenges. Assign new projects, initiate cross-training, and identify skill-building opportunities. Stay abreast of company plans that might create such opportunities.

Tell your staff that you intend to start discussing individual career development. Let them know what you'll be doing and why. If you're not sure what to say, try this at your next staff meeting: "I was reading an article about managing careers, and I realized we don't talk enough about this topic. I'd like to do more. What do you think? What would be helpful to you?"

Offer each of your employees an opportunity to discuss their plans. Set aside private time to talk about their goals, plans and expectations. Keep it informal and ask lots of questions. Don't evaluate—just listen. Offer ideas and suggestions for development. Ask them how you can help them reach their goals. Offer to be an ongoing resource.

Consider employees' interests and values when delegating work. People are motivated most by work that interests them—and what interests them may not always be where their skills and experience lie. Find out what they want to do, and then leverage their interests to your advantage, as well as theirs.

View employees as partners, essential to the department's success. You're not expected to have all the answers—if you think you do, your staff probably resents it! Allow people to disagree with you and to vent dissatisfaction when they need to. Don't always think you have to fix things. Sometimes listening is all that's needed.

Help employees network with colleagues, inside and outside the company. You can build commitment by giving employees visibility. What resources, internal and external, can you point employees to for information and to build their professional networks?

Look for opportunities for employees to represent your department on company-wide projects, or allow employees a day to shadow colleagues in other departments. Your key performers will be less likely to jump ship if they have a better understanding of other roles, functions, and career possibilities in the organization. And even if they do decide to leave, they're more likely to respect you enough to ease the transition.

Seize opportunities for casual conversations with your employees. Chatting about career development doesn't have to be a formal event. A 15-minute talk over coffee can be more productive than a scheduled meeting in your office. Go for a walk or grab a quick lunch together. Keep the informal lines of communication open.

Regularly set aside 10 to 15 minutes during staff meetings to discuss career topics. Years of corporate restructuring have caused people to equate talk of career development with downsizing, because career issues often are only discussed during crises. Incorporate career development topics into your staff meetings. Let your people pick the topics and make presentations to the rest of the group. Focus on such things as self-marketing tips, training resources, networking skills and industry trends.

Take charge of your own career development. If you're not feeling good about your own future, you can't be very effective in helping your employees with theirs. If your boss hasn't been a good career advisor or resource, seek him or her out and ask about opportunities for development. Map out your own career development and you'll be more likely get where you want to go—and you'll be a great role model for your staff.

Source: King, D. (n.d.). *How to retain your top achievers*. Raleigh, NC: Workplace Options.