

# Engaging and retaining your best talent

**Building employee loyalty and commitment through your personal leadership can help you retain your best talent.**

**By Sue Oliver**

**S**o much is being written about the “A” talent transfer that is coming as the economy and hiring strengthen. We all know that it has been a very difficult two years. Recent estimates place the percentage of potential talent departures at approximately 60 percent as people increasingly see the opportunity to advance and grow with other organizations. And research that tells us talent departs because of the manager, not the company. So what are managers to do?

If you want to engage and retain your best talent, you have to build employee loyalty and commitment through your personal leadership. Here are six recommended steps for managers to retain and engage their top performers.

## **1. Do not assume your employees know what you expect—set expectations before challenges occur.**

Even if your employees are not new to your organization, talk to them privately about your expectations and how they can be successful. Support them in understanding what your preferences are about scheduling meetings, appointments, decision-making and work product development. Help them understand the unwritten rules about your organization’s culture and what it takes to be successful.

It is never too late to have this “contracting” conversation with your employees. The advent of a new year is a natural time for setting expectations, understanding personal and professional needs and exploring new ways for them to be successful.

## **2. Set a tone that is supportive and open to feedback.**

Let your employees know your desire for a positive relationship. Let them know you want them

> continued on page 47



to be personally successful. Openly solicit your employees' needs and wants. Let them know if you cannot provide something, you will be honest about why.

Be candid with your employees about your desire to continually improve your own leadership. If they see anything about your leadership that causes them challenges, ask them to share the information with you and you, in turn, agree to be appreciative of their openness.

Most of all, let your employees know you want the chance to retain them and promote their personal growth and development.

### 3. Understand what your top talent needs.

Make certain you know the top three things that would keep your talent and the one thing that would cause them to leave. Understand what your top talent is passionate about and what form of recognition is important to them. If you cannot answer those questions about your direct reports, you are not as effective as you need to be.

Maybe upward mobility is really important to you, but flexibility is important to some of your direct reports. It may be something you cannot give them, but either way you need to know. The same is true of recognition or how they would like to improve and grow. Where you can, give your top talent what they need vs. what you think they need.

### 4. Provide timely, specific feedback and for the right reasons.

There are only two purposes for feedback: (1) to reinforce behavior or (2) to shift behavior to improve it. If you are giving feedback for any other reason, rethink it and consider whether you are being constructive by giving the information you are giving. Check your motives at the door.

Be timely with feedback. If you don't provide timely feedback, you missed the opportunity and need to wait until it happens again. Your employee needs to be able to recall the behavior in their recent memory. Otherwise, your feedback long after the fact looks as if you are holding a grudge and the practice is not seen as constructive.

Be specific with your feedback—both positive and negative. What does the behavior look like that you want your employee to do more of or to change? What is the impact of their behavior on themselves and others? Summon the courage as a leader to be clear and direct in order to enable your employees to understand what needs to happen to be successful.

Offer your employees an alternative way to act, and paint a picture for them about how the alternative behavior would look. Defensiveness or upset is natural, but if feedback is timely, specific and provides alternative, successful behaviors, it moves

most employees beyond defensiveness and upset to rational action.

### 5. Manage your team's performance fairly and actively.

Top performers need less coaching and are more marketable than others on your team, but if you are tolerant of poor performers, top talent view their work environment negatively. Top talent expects their opportunities for advancement and personal growth will not be hampered by subpar performers at any level. Being diligent as a leader in managing and improving team performance and accountability is a great motivator for your best talent.

### 6. Build and reward teamwork.

One of the best ways to retain and engage top talent is through team loyalty and collaboration. The best work environments are those in which team members can speak up openly to improve the team's functioning and the level of work produced is top quality. The best managers are those who promote and manage differences of opinion and healthy debate within a team to encourage high performance.

Managers who are effective at engaging and retaining talent focus on setting high team standards, leveraging individual strengths, showing genuine appreciation and hardwiring accountability and fairness into rewards and team outputs.

Top talent wants to be understood and nurtured individually, but challenged as a larger group. Managers who can do both successfully are a magnet for top talent within organizations.

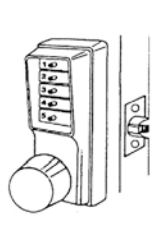
I encourage managers to apply these six steps in 2011 to retain and engage their best talent. Not only will retention and engagement increase, but organizational performance, as well. ✪

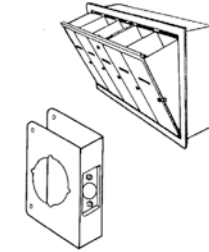
*Sue Oliver is the principal for Katana Partners, a national consulting firm focusing on employee engagement and organizational performance. She will be presenting the following seminars at the 2011 TAA Education Conference & Lone Star Expo in Fort Worth: **Making How to Engage and Retain Your Best Talent** on Thursday, April 14 from 11 a.m.-12:30 p.m. and **Negotiating for Success** on Friday, April 15 from 10-11:15 a.m.*

CKI

Website: [www.ckilock.com](http://www.ckilock.com)  
 E-mail: [ckilock@ckilock.com](mailto:ckilock@ckilock.com)  
 Houston 713-462-0704  
 Toll Free 800-445-5230

LICENSE B11985



- Deadbolts
- Cabinet Knobs
- Security Locks

- Door Hardware
- Bath Hardware

- Key Machines
- Key Blanks
- Key Cabinets

- Mailboxes
- Access Gate Locks

**Kwikset**  
BALDWIN

**WEISER LOCK**  
SIMPLEX

**SECURITY**  
Weslock

**SCHLAGE**  
PRIMUS