Success Summaries

How to Motivate Top Talent in Difficult Times

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How to Motivate Top Talent in Difficult Times

So how do you motivate your top talent to achieve the company’s goals?

How do you keep them from contacting recruiters?

How do you keep them passionate about coming to work?

How do you keep them engaged day after day?

The answer to all of these is “culture.” Even in difficult times top talent, by definition, will always rise to the occasion. They will always strive to be the best. If they don’t, they aren’t top talent. However, even top talent can burn out, get frustrated, not see the light at the end of the tunnel or wonder if they are really contributing.

It is the role of all leaders and managers to ensure these things don’t happen. There seems to be a consistent theme as to what great managers do in difficult times to hold on to and even attract top talent.

The following are seven areas managers must focus on to ensure they keep their top talent motivated:

**Companies must have a performance based culture.** Even in difficult times there must be clearly defined goals for the company. These goals must cascade down to your top talent. They must have quantifiable objectives that motivate them, so when reached, they feel a sense of accomplishment. Providing specific time based goals with achievable results clarifies exactly what is expected of your people. Your best talent will embrace the goals and not stop until they reach the goal. Employee engagement is critical to retaining your best people. Better engagement is achieved when your employees know ‘what great looks like’ in their positions. By outlining what behaviors lead to top performance they can focus on the right areas that drive results in their roles. This is further enriched by then developing these skills and behaviors in your workforce through better coaching and development.

**Fix dysfunctional culture.** This is probably the biggest reason top talent gets nervous and begins to think outside your company. Do you know your company’s culture? Can you define it? Will your executive staff define it the same way? Will front-line employees define it the same way? If not, this is the time to begin working on it.

Then once the culture is well defined, do the behaviors match the culture? Do managers from the CEO on down demonstrate this culture day-to-day in how the deal with the employees, customers and vendors? You can’t claim to have a culture of teamwork if the manager’s idea of teamwork is, “As long as we do things my way, without any questions, you can be on my team.”
Does your organization have a clearly defined vision and mission statement? Can you state it? What are your contributions to the mission? Having a strong vision and mission statement are critical to culture. A well-defined vision statement gives clear purpose to a workforce, and a well-defined mission statement will identify what it is that we do every day. Do not undervalue what a well-crafted vision and mission statement can do to rally a workforce around a common purpose.

**Respect and appreciation.** This is probably the least expensive and least used method to motivate and retain top talent. Small things can make a big difference with top talent. Respecting their contributions, listening to them, including them in the decision making process, asking for their thoughts and ideas all make them feel respected and appreciated. Consider building a culture that respects your top talent so they feel appreciated. Top talent does not want to be taken for granted. Once a week write a thank you note to someone you work with for a job well done – it will pay immediate dividends!

**Consistent feedback.** This could be considered a subset of ‘Respect and appreciation’ but more formal. This includes regular and structured one-on-one feedback sessions. Not standing in the hallway conversations, but actually sitting down and focusing on them. Giving them feedback, encouraging them, listening to what their needs are (even if you can’t meet them, just listening), taking an interest in their career and building a shared bond. This makes them feel their manager cares about them as a person, not just an employee. This must be authentic.

The feedback process is greatly enhanced by the utilization of a competency model that identifies ‘what great looks like’ in a particular role. Using the competency model as a guide, you can assess the employee’s performance of the identified skills, knowledge and behaviors that drive performance specific to their role. It ensures you are measuring and developing the right skill-sets. Collaboratively, you can create a development plan specific to their needs, which demonstrates your commitment to their growth.

**Praise.** You may have experienced a manager with this philosophy: “That is what they get paid for. Why should I thank them? They should thank me for having a job.” How did you like it?

Compare that to a manager with this philosophy: “Thanks, I know it is just part of your job, but I appreciate the pride you take in your work. It helps everyone in the department.” How did you like that?

A little praise goes a long way to motivate people. In difficult times when people are doing more than expected and yes maybe they should be glad to have a job, demonstrating appreciation will be returned when the economy turns and they don’t have to be working there any longer.

**Education and growth.** Top talent insists on getting better. They know once their learning curve flattens out, future opportunities can become limited. Top talent does not like to have their growth potential limited. Giving your best people the opportunity to take some additional classes, lead a project...
outside their normal job, challenge them with new opportunities, give them a chance to serve on a cross functional team or take an on-line class will ensure they are becoming better. All these not only ensure your top talent is growing, but also makes them a more valuable employee.

**Self-motivating culture.** Executives and managers have the power to inspire the employees around them to self-motivate. The ability of managers to get the most out of the people they employ is critical to the success and productivity improvements of any organization. Top talent by their very nature is self-motivated. The problem with many companies is in tough times rather than unleash this powerful and innate behavior to get more productivity; they instead demand more productivity and thereby often stymie this behavior.

This element of leadership is one of the core areas to reflect upon when retaining executives and managers or for that matter when hiring leaders. As a company begins to reflect on this they need to ask themselves some questions.

- How do the company’s executives and managers currently inspire others to self-motivate?
- Is this a core value of the company? Should it be a core value of the company?
- What best practice techniques have worked and are now part of the company’s culture?
- What are the executives and managers actively doing to inspire their direct reports to self-motivate?
- Which self-motivating techniques have not been successful?
- What do the executives and managers consistently do to learn about the latest tactics and methods around inspiring their direct reports to self-motivate?
- How do the executives and managers specifically build the inspiration to self-motivation into their staff meetings and one-on-one conversations with their direct reports?
- Has the company surveyed its employees to determine if the executives and managers inspire self-motivation?
- When interviewing candidates – how does the candidate get a precise understanding of the manager’s ability to inspire motivation?

How would the company’s employees and managers answer these questions? Do the executives and managers believe in their heart it is their responsibility as a manager, executive, leader, owner, founder to inspire their people to self-motivate? If so, where would their employees rate their performance on self-motivating on a ten point scale – 1 being weak and 10 being the poster child for inspiration and self-motivation? As the company’s leader do ALL the managers in the company know how to inspire their direct reports to self-motivate? Does the company’s CEO inspire self-motivation all the time or only as passing thought? What would the executive’s and manager’s direct reports tell others about the leadership’s ability to inspire self-motivation?

If a company’s leadership cannot inspire its very best people to self-motivate, they will never succeed as great managers or executives. Now this begins digging into the realm of culture, company values,
retention, employee satisfaction, employee motivation, employee engagement, and ultimately back to the first point – performance.

Is it time to re-examine how the company’s leadership manages and lead? How do they specifically inspire others every day?

Consider these areas as a way to inspire and motivate your top talent. Your best people will appreciate this more than most executives and managers realize. The increase in productivity by having motivated employees is the best ROI any company can receive.
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