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Winning the Talent War

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Be a mentor, not a dictator, if you want to keep your best people .

J is for jerk. Don't be one.

That's the tip Beverly Kaye likes to tout most - and laugh about - when discussing the book she wrote with Sharon Jordan-Evans, *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* (Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2005).

The book, the third edition of which was released in March, provides 26 alphabetized "engagement strategies for busy managers," of which J-is-for-jerk is number 10. For federal managers concerned about relating to the next generation of civil servants, it's a welcome guide.

It's routinely reported that government employees are aging. Many soon will be eligible for retirement. But even during an era of outsourcing, tight budgets and hiring freezes, government still needs top-quality program managers to make sure taxpayers are getting their money's worth.

If managers don't learn how to relate to their younger Gen-X and Gen-Y employees now, Kaye says, then they are in for trouble. "Managers who take talent for granted are going to be hit by the perfect storm," she says, an exodus of potentially valuable workers caused by "a healthier economy, unhappy employees and changing demographics."

Staving off the storm isn't rocket science, but at the same time, there aren't any easy-to-follow formulas either. Every employee is different. What it boils down to, says Kaye, is managers must view themselves more as motivators and mentors and less as dictators.

Kaye knows the average 50-something government manager might revolt at what she's saying. "Whatever happened to paying your dues? Showing loyalty? Waiting your turn?" he might ask. To which Kaye responds: "We aren't saying treat them as prima donnas, but as human beings, with wants and needs and likes."

It's about challenging your employees and stopping to ask, "What is it you really love doing?" Kaye says. The best talent always will have opportunities in the private sector. In many cases, companies will offer better pay and benefits. The only way government can compete is to offer these top performers a job that they truly love.

Kaye recalls a plane trip when she sat next to a well-educated, 24-year-old woman who worked for an intelligence agency. The young woman felt stifled sitting at a computer for 10 hours a day, since her best skills, she said, were working with people. She was ready to quit. Her rationale, she told Kaye: "If I'm unhappy in my government job, why not leave for the private sector, where I might also be unhappy, but I'll earn twice as much."

The third edition of Kaye's book also might provide insights for government managers seeking to get more from older workers. It combines tips from the first edition, which focused on holding on to staff in a tight labor market, and the second, which offered tips on reviving older workers who've fallen into workplace ruts.

Kaye says managers need to start with total frankness. They should ask employees: What can I do to keep you, or what can I do to help you love this job again? Then, Kaye says, they must listen to each employee's answer and see what they can do to fulfill it. "Too many managers say they don't have time

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for [this], but you have to," says Kaye. "Without talent, you ain't got nothing."

The ABCs of Staying Power

- **Ask** What keeps you here? Do you know what they want?
- **Buck** It stops here. Who's in charge of keeping them?
- **Careers** Support growth. Are you building their future, or are you in the way?
- **Dignity** Show respect. Do they know that you respect them?
- **Enrich** Energize the job. Do your people have to leave to find growth and challenge?

Source: *Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay* by Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans

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