
Love 'em or Lose 'em: Getting Good People to Stay

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Retaining good staff is an issue for all organisations, whether they be large corporates, educational institutions, libraries or small businesses. Now in its 3rd edition, this title is as relevant now as it was when it was first published in 1999. It has been reviewed many times since then, and as noted on the cover, it is a *Wall Street Journal* bestseller – the 3rd edition recently made the “What corporate America is reading” *McClatchy-Tribune* Top 25 list published in the *Tri-State Business Times*, January 2007.

What then has made this book so popular and a must read for any manager? First of all it tackles strategies for retention in a practical manner, there is no hype, no quick-fire formula, just sensible suggestions that you can take or leave according to your organisation's circumstances. By the authors' own admission the strategies outlined in this book are timeless; they will be as relevant in ten years time as they were when the book was first published nearly ten years ago. They have been developed from information collected over a two-year period from many people, friends, colleagues and employees from many different organisations on what makes some decide to stay with or leave their employer.

Second, the message is very well presented; there are 26 chapters, one for each letter of the alphabet. Each chapter follows the same pattern of “to do” lists; Alas stories; the personal experience of someone who has left; some company examples and there are nice little graphic sidebars pointing to other relevant chapters. If you read nothing else the very last part of each chapter has a paragraph called the “Bottom line” which briefly summarises each chapter and challenges you, the manager, to follow through with action.

Many managers think that people leave their employ because they can get better remunerated elsewhere and that you can keep good staff by offering them more money. The authors dispel this myth, believing that keeping good staff is all about providing an environment that offers work that is meaningful and challenging; where there is provision for learning and development; fair remuneration; recognition for a job well done; and a boss who respects and listens to staff and a collegial atmosphere. With regard to the latter, the authors note that a very high proportion (75 per cent) of those who leave a company leave because their managers failed in this area.

Another important message, one that we simply cannot ignore, is that we have an aging workforce, within the next ten years the impact of labour shortages will be felt everywhere as the “baby boomers” reach retirement age. Succession planning is a must which means that it is even more important to retain those staff who show talent and promise and who we may have invested a lot of time and money on developing. If you calculate the cost of losing and replacing talented staff it is well worth putting in place strategies to retain them.

Keeping this in mind I singled out several chapters that provided ideas which for me could be put into practice immediately. I am the manager of a team of specialist researchers in a scientific research organisation. I need staff with traditional reference librarian skills, preferably a science background and most of all excellent communication skills. A recent recruitment exercise has confirmed the importance of getting the right fit for this role, as the cost of hiring staff is high, as is making a wrong choice. Chapter Eight covers this area well and the message is that if you do get the right fit then you increase the odds of retaining staff. The importance of analysing the job, creating an interview guide that includes behavioural questions, including others in the process (direct reports or peers) and the use of personality and skill assessments are stressed.

The Chapter relating to staff promotion and goal setting stresses that it is not just a case of moving up for many staff. Often they are happy with realignment, relocation or just getting the chance to explore other options within the workplace. Job enrichment is an area that is often ignored but it allows staff to expand their job, refine their expertise and expand their knowledge in areas they enjoy.

I would have welcomed a mentor early on in my career; it would have helped build confidence in my ability and maybe changed the direction I ultimately moved in. The Chapter on being a mentor is a reminder that managers do have a role to play here, the first sentence in the chapter says it all – “People with mentors are twice as likely to stay”.

Spelling out what a mentor actually does in a useful, easy to remember style is very useful – Model, Encourage, Nurture, Teach, Organisational Reality. The chapter discusses each of these areas concluding with a “To do” checklist designed to facilitate discussion with your team on organisational reality. The authors note that managers can gain from letting staff coach them on how they might be more effective in their development, which in turn adds to their own learning and makes them a better mentor.

Of all the chapters, Chapter 24 was for me the most useful – “X-ers and other generations”. We are all aware of the terms associated with the different generations but how many of us have really thought about the real differences between them and how important it is for both recruitment and retention of staff? This chapter looks at the Matures, Boomers, X-ers and Ys in turn, addressing such areas as their flexibility, what they bring to the workplace and what they want out of it. There is a very useful section on clash avoidance and a very useful cheat sheet noting each generation and the differences in the areas of Work ethic, Loyalty, Technology and Reporting relationships – I will certainly be referring to it in the future.

In summary this is an excellent book on the subject and worthy of a place on any manager’s desk as a ready reference, it should definitely not be relegated to the book shelves with all the other management books to gather dust. It is worth noting that the authors also have a web site which provides additional useful information at www.keepem.com and they have also published a companion guide for employees – *Love it, Don’t Leave it: 26 Ways to Get What You Want at Work*.

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