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# Retain Employees Without Extra Costs

Lan Nguyen

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In troubled times like these, having an employee-retention policy centered on golden handcuffs can be financial suicide. Keep staff happy and on your payroll by adopting these 12 incentives that won't put you in the red. **What's your corporate culture?** Before you figure out what rewards to offer, think about your company's mission and culture. Does the work environment encourage someone to pitch in if he finishes his work? How well does a certain employee fit? Part of retention is making sure you have the right players on your team, says Douglas Lipp, author of "The Changing Face of Today's Customer: Strategies for Attracting and Retaining a Diverse Customer and Employee Base in Your Local Market" (Hickethier Publishing International). "Hire right and then train right and treat right," he explains. "Often times, when owners and managers are trying to get people, they are just hiring a warm heartbeat. They are not considering the culture and the needs of the team. If you have the wrong people on board, you can spend all the money in the world to train them, but you're still shooting yourself in the foot." Hire the people with the right attitude and "turnover is less by default." **Pay them in pats:** On the back, that is. People like to hear they're doing a good job. They need to feel their hard work and contributions are being acknowledged. Hence, take the time to take them aside and thank them on a regular basis, says Susan Rae Baker, founder of [Future Endeavors LLC](#), a life and business coaching firm. Talk can be cheap. **Don't be afraid to ask:** Set up a meeting or take all your valued employees out for coffee and just ask what would make them happy in their jobs. During tough economic times, owners and managers are too afraid to ask or feel safe that staff won't leave because the job market is so bad. But during the last economic downturn in 2001, "we saw that people become disengaged and are busy updating their resumes," warns Sharon Jordan-Evans, an executive coach and president of the [Jordan Evans Group](#). "The minute the economic lights went on, people went wild. We found that 80% of people looked elsewhere." "You can build employee loyalty if you have ongoing conversations about how they are doing and how you are doing," she adds. "People are willing to pull together if they feel loyalty for the boss and the work at hand." The answers may surprise you because more often than not, it's not about the money. **Listen with an open mind:** When you're soliciting their opinions on what you could do to keep them happy in their jobs, be clear that they will not face any retaliation for being honest. **Be available:** Have an open-door policy. Too often, a rigid hierarchy is in place. But if you let "employees have a feel for who you are, what you're accomplishing and that you are all in this together," you have a better chance of keeping them, says Dr. L. Todd Thomas, president and founder of [IMPACT Consulting and Development](#). "The problem with the idea of 'people are our greatest assets' is that it can dehumanize 'people.' Make sure you and your leadership team take the time to know your employees -- their names, their interests and what excites them about their job." **Look to the future:** Some want to know that they are acquiring new skills and building their resume. So ask them what they want to learn next year. Let them shadow someone on staff with that skill. Set them up with mentors. Members of the younger generation are especially all about building their own portfolio of skills, says Jordan-Evans, who also co-authored "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay and Love It" (Berrett-Koehler Publishers). **Work as a team:** One of the easiest,

and least expensive, retention tools is to increase staff involvement in solving company issues, says Thomas, co-author of the upcoming "Chicken Soup for the Soul: Life Lessons for Leaders" (HCI). In addition, clarify how each worker contributes to the bigger picture. "You may see the necessity of their job, but they may not understand how important their performance actually is." **Let them run with it:** Trust them to do their jobs. That means giving them the responsibility and leeway to handle problems when they crop up. **Train, train, train:** Training shouldn't stop after the first day on the job. Speaker and executive trainer [Lipp](#) found that the most successful of the KFC franchisers he advised were ones who continued to train their staff at every meeting. They were also ones "who ran a fun place." **Increase volunteerism:** During bad times, it's easy to get caught up in fear about your situation. Build a sense of community by encouraging workers to pitch in at charities like Habitat for Humanity, says Bill Catlette, a workplace expert and co-author of "Contented Cows MOOve Faster: How Good Leaders Get People to Put More OOMPH! Into Their Work" (R. Brent & Company). **Be creative with perks:** Sometimes you will have to spend money to keep up morale. But it doesn't have to be a splashy party or a chic retreat. Pizza Fridays could do the trick. Or let employees dress down on days other than Friday as long as they are not meeting clients. Eat lunch occasionally with your staff in the office kitchen or cafeteria. Allow people to occasionally leave a couple hours early for family events like their children's soccer game, as long as the work gets done. Another cheap perk to offer: sign up for employee-paid benefits like Alfac, recommends Baker, who is also author of "The Last Box: A Woman's Guide to Surviving Corporate America" (AuthorHouse). "It doesn't cost you anything and it provides them with income if they are out on disability. You're adding benefits without cost to the company." **No layoffs unless absolutely necessary:** Making layoffs as the last resort "sends a powerful message to employees that they are wanted, valued and will be treated as something other than a disposable asset," recommends Catlette. "Ergo, they are more inclined to stay and work hard for you."

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