

MANAGE My Career and I'll Perform

The importance of a clear career perspective for top talent to stay and perform

What makes people want to leave their company? Exit interviews conducted by the Saratoga Institute in the USA, reveal that less than 20 per cent of all employees leave their jobs for better pay, benefits and perks.* More important reasons for employees voluntarily leaving jobs are:

- Misalignment of mutual expectations
- Person-job mismatch
- Insufficient coaching and feedback
- Perception of poor career-advancement prospects
- Work-life imbalance
- Distrust of senior leadership
- Low confidence in senior leadership

Photo by: Mark Evans

Based on my own worldwide corporate experience and coaching work with clients, it seems that these US findings are very similar to the current work situation in Europe and Asia. Apparently, the basic needs of people are the same worldwide, and these are:

- The need to be respected and acknowledged
- The need to belong to a worthwhile group
- The need to be recognized as a worthy human being

Obviously, the competence of leadership in an organization can have a huge effect on these needs and, consequently, on the performance level and retention rate within the organization.

Within the scope of this article I will focus on career advancement prospects and their influence on performance and retention.

An employee's perspective is simple: an employee is motivated to perform better when he can see how his performance affects his career in the long run than when he cannot see how his performance affects career advancement.

If this is so clear, why do many managers hesitate to nurture the career advancement of their employees, especially their top talent?

Many leaders are afraid to lose their best performers after a promotion to another position in another department. After all, they would have to look for a replacement, retrain the new person and so on – which all lead to additional work and cost, and perhaps a drop in overall performance of the leader's team.

What is the effect of the lack of career advancement on the company? Employee performance is not as high as it could be and the best performers eventually leave the company because they cannot see where their careers are headed.

Let's look at the other side of the coin: what happens when a manager actually nurtures the career development of his staff? Yes, top talent might leave the department a bit earlier than in the other scenario but there are also considerable benefits for the manager who adopts this attitude:

- His team feels that it is worthwhile to perform well, as there are real chances to progress in one's career, leading to a positive effect on overall performance;
- His attitude fosters a performance and progress culture among all members of the team;
- With such a culture, employees from other departments perceive the manager's department as a place of opportunity for their own advancement. Hence, this manager will attract the best talent to work for him.

For a leader who recognizes the benefits of supporting the career advancement of his team members, what are the key competencies required to do this successfully?

1) Feedback and Feed-Forward

One of the most basic and important needs of any human being is the need for recognition. Providing feedback, whether positive or negative, tells an employee that he is recognized as a person. In fact, receiving no feedback at all is worse than receiving negative feedback. However, if a superior focuses only on the weaknesses of an individual, morale will be adversely affected.

A first-class leader takes any opportunity to provide honest feedback, good or critical. He focuses first on the strengths of an employee and highlights them, thus providing a positive atmosphere. Once the positive points have been raised and discussed, areas for improvement can be addressed. If an employee is not talented at all for certain tasks, it is usually more productive to figure out how such tasks could be delegated or how the employee can work around them. It is a better idea to build on the strengths of the employee rather than to fix huge weaknesses. For instance, would you push a talented swimmer who is not a talented runner to become a better runner? With extensive training, there may be some improvement, but that person is unlikely to become a world-class runner. However, if you put the same energy and effort into making him an even better swimmer, the person has a chance to become world-class at swimming.

Feed-forward

I use the term "feed-forward" to draw attention to the future rather than dwell on the past. The feedback process should lead to a feed-forward process, in which both the leader and his team members discuss how to learn from the past and move forward to achieve goals and prepare for the next career step. This discussion should include agreements on how things will be done differently, identification of tools, learning and assistance needed to

achieve the goal, and last but not least, clarification of the role of the leader in this process.

2) Coaching and Supporting People

Coaching in this context means to display the following core coaching skills:

- Establishing a deep level of trust
- Active listening
- Powerful questioning
- Agreeing on career steps to be achieved
- Keeping the employee accountable

Let's not forget that we want to support the employee in his career advancement. Empty promises will not do the job and have a strong adverse impact on the trust level between a leader and his team members.

Also, to assure a high likelihood of achieving the intended goals, a leader should leave as much ownership as possible with his employee, ie, the employee should determine his own next steps and actions. Of course, the manager should facilitate this process and encourage the best possible outcome. An appropriate coaching mindset is very helpful in achieving this.

3) Rewarding Performance

While monetary rewards are sometimes appropriate, it is often forgotten that a manager has a variety of other tools at his disposal to reward good performance. One of these tools is to extend the responsibility of a talented and high-performing employee. For example, an outstanding employee might not be immediately promoted to a leadership position but could be promoted to become the deputy of the department head, or a high-performing sales person could be entrusted with some of the key accounts of the company. This approach can bridge the time gap between the present and when a higher position is available, and keeps top talent loyal and performing well.

Summary: Appropriately and actively managing the career of one's team members creates a clear win-win situation for all parties involved – the employee, the manager and the company. It might not always be the easiest path, but it's certainly a rewarding one.

* Branham L, *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*. NY: American Management Association; 2005