

# Cultivating Commitment: Keys to Retaining Human Capital

By Joanne L. Smikle, PhD



**W**HAT DOES IT REALLY TAKE TO RETAIN HUMAN capital, employees at all levels? Is there a magic formula for building healthy retention? In fact, there is no such mystical concoction. However, there are certain steps that thoughtful employers can take to get and keep people throughout the enterprise engaged. My dissertation research, a qualitative study of commitment and retention, allowed employees to share their notions of what it takes not just to get them, but to keep them. The primary themes that emerged through that research are presented in this article. These themes are the foundation for four research-based strategies for stopping the human capital hemorrhage. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of the strategies.

Before presenting the strategies, it is important to share information about the research. Thirty-nine interviews were conducted with employees of a long-term care company. They all had more than ten years of tenure, worked at various locations throughout the state of Florida, and represented the full gamut of positions, ranging from nursing assistant to laundry aide to social worker to management. This company was selected because it has better retention than its industry peers.

## Four Strategies

The first strategy is for the organization to *inspire positive feelings*. Employees told of the formal and informal actions that their employer had taken to make them feel good about themselves, their roles, and the organization. This strategy is consistent with what is presented in not only academic literature, but also practitioner literature, on employee commitment. Vance (2006) holds that people have positive feelings toward the organizations to which they commit. He cites positive feelings as a key component of commitment.

These positive feelings translated into a desire to remain with the company. Many employees expressed pride in working for the organization and a desire to remain until retirement. A nurse's assistant stated that post-retirement she will "come back and volunteer." The desire to remain with the company was apparent by the volume of comments indicating that the employees genuinely want to stay. In fact, the statements offered during the

interviews reflect Vance's (2006) assertion that an employee's commitment is rational, assuming that the right conditions are in place in the enterprise. He advises that employees are conscious in their decisions to commit to organizations, that they thoughtfully plan and execute those commitments.

The second strategy is to *be attentive to the behavior of leadership*. Study participants shared stories of leaders at all levels who inspired, encouraged and supported them. They told stories of leaders who made missteps and mistakes, but were humble enough to acknowledge error and apologize. They recounted instances of ways in which leaders from the CEO down to building management made them feel like they mattered as individual contributors. Leadership behavior is of great importance to commitment and retention.

How leaders conduct themselves has a profound impact on why the employees in this research both committed and stayed. Ulrich & Smallwood (2004) stated that commitment is earned by leaders; it does not happen by chance. This requires that leaders be adept at two critical components of emotional intelligence: self-awareness and self-management. They must be conscious of how their behavior impacts the company in both overt and covert ways. While employees may not openly challenge inappropriate leadership behavior, they send clear messages when they find employment elsewhere. It is important to examine which leaders are plagued with the most turnover. Those employees who depart have fired their bosses. The enterprise must be aware of problem leaders and take action for the good of the organization.

The third strategy is to *imbue a sense of connectedness throughout the enterprise*. The feelings of being connected to residents and coworkers were reflected in countless narratives. It is expected that in a long-term care facility there would be some degree of closeness to the residents; however, many employees described the relationships as familial. This extended to the relationships that employees had with one another. Several participants described their work environment as "it's like family, we're like family." Participants described these attachments in tearful stories

that underscored the deep feelings that they have for one another and the residents.

These close relationships compel participants to stay with the organization. An employee from the Admissions Department linked these relationships with her own retention when she said that "...we're a family...and it's just hard, you can't just up and leave like that..." A nurse offered the following observation of her relationships with coworkers, "...it's basically the relationships with the people I work with that kept me here."

These excerpts raise the question of how, exactly, does an organization create this sense of connectedness. An environment that places collaboration over competition can breed connectedness. This requires an examination of how work actually gets accomplished. It is not sufficient to tout teamwork; collaboration has to become sanctioned, encouraged, and perhaps mandated. Small activities like celebrating births, graduations and other life passages that are consistently woven into the fiber of the organization remind employees of their humanness and their lives beyond the organization, thereby creating connections. Demonstrating support through struggles also reinforces human connections. When an employer shows public and private support for employees who are facing hardship, connections are forged. Finally, creating avenues for social connections enables employees to relax and get to know

each other beyond their responsibilities. This may include informal potlucks, afternoons at theme parks, golf outings or any number of other forums that make connection possible and plausible.

The fourth and final strategy is to *create opportunities for growth*. Whether formal or informal, participants valued having opportunities for expansion of their roles and skills. The work that this organization does to offer growth opportunities positively impacts retention and commitment. An administrator stated that "...they gave me the opportunity to grow and to do something different and enhance my skills...and I really loved it." This comment highlights the dual nature of the commitment equation. Whitener (2001) found that an employee's commitment is stronger "when they perceive that the organization is committed to and supportive of them" (p.530). Commitment is not a one-way street; the employer must demonstrate it if they are to cultivate it among their employees.

The administrator's statement indicated a level of enjoyment brought on by the opportunity that was presented. There was an overwhelming sense of enjoyment expressed by employees who have had growth opportunities. A nursing assistant said "...they give you opportunities to move up in the company...it's very rewarding...it benefits you." Growth is key to retaining the top talent in any industry.



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People want to flex their intellectual muscles if for no other reason than to prevent boredom. It is important to note that growth does not have to necessarily lead to a promotion. Many growth opportunities simply afford people the opportunity to do something new, different or challenging. Some employers mistakenly think they have to limit developmental opportunities because they have limited promotional opportunities. Environments with few promotional opportunities should be offering the most developmental enhancements so that people will have an incentive to be engaged and to stay with the organization.

## Implications of the Strategies

What do these themes, now translated into meaningful strategies, mean for an enterprise struggling to get and keep good people? They mean that enterprises large and small have to be very conscious in their treatment of human capital. It is not sufficient to allow a culture to emerge. Instead, conscious, thoughtful attention must be paid to creating a culture that affirms the value of each member of the organization.

This type of attention requires well-planned, strategic decisions to invest heavily in the human element. These investments can take on various forms. Training and development are the most obvious. Other forms of investment come in the form of meaningful corporate recognition initiatives. Meaningful is the operative word. Recognition

must be deemed worthy by the recipient, not the bestower. Expend the energy finding out which forms of recognition will work best in your organization. Then design a comprehensive approach that has methods for staying fresh embedded in the design. Employee of the Month gets old very quickly. Find creative approaches to recognize contributions and contributors.

Other forms of investment include measurement of intangibles like culture. Culture audits help to surface the subtle nuances missed through employee satisfaction surveys. They unearth the factors that either promote or retard retention. Culture audits enable an organization to develop sense of how who it is differs or is in alignment with what it says. This is an excellent tool for identifying systemic misalignments. Of course, that identification must be followed by purposeful action.

The final implication is that the emphasis cannot be solely on retention. Instead the emphasis must be on the whole health of the organization. If the organization is well aligned, focused on people before profit, simultaneously reflective and strategic, retention will naturally occur because the conditions that promote it are present. Rather than having a myopic focus on keeping talent, it is more beneficial to have a broad, accurate focus on the conditions required to cultivate sustainable commitment.

## Summary

The four strategies presented do not represent the magic formula for retention. They do, however, offer tactics that can be used to create higher levels of commitment in almost any work environment. They address key considerations like leadership behavior, whether employees are afforded opportunities for growth, whether they can connect deeply. These considerations, combined with other factors, create positive feelings that are critical components of the commitment and retention equation.

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