



# Capturing Talent

By Joanne L. Smikle

**W**hat are the laws of attraction for a workplace that not only captures the top talent in the public sector, but also cultivates and keeps it? While some would argue that the best and brightest seldom pursue careers in the public sector, this is simply not the case. The fact is that these hot commodities are selective about where they invest their career competence and are looking for a good fit. There are several characteristics of organizations that provide the fit they seek: the Human Element, the Mission and the Vibe.

## The Human Element

Beginning with the human element, prospective employees want to work in a place that treats them as people—not commodities. That means they are looking for respect and recognition. This is not to say that every day has to be filled with kudos and pats on the back; rather that recognition is the norm and not the exception. Most of us want to be acknowledged for a job well done, and when we fail to meet the mark despite our best efforts, we still want to know that our labors were appreciated. Far too many managers only acknowledge successes. What about all of the hard work that failed to yield a major success? That, too, must be acknowledged.

This notion of honoring the human element extends to leadership practices. People who have much to offer want to work with and for leaders of the same caliber. Agencies have not done themselves a favor by promoting mediocre managers to more senior positions.

These practices undermine the credibility of the entire organization. They also make it more difficult to get and keep people who reflect a commitment to the highest standards. The special people are looking for people to serve as mentors and role models. They are looking for the type of leadership that model best practices for the public sector, understand issues and trends and cultivate forward-focused work environments. Clearly some are not capable of cultivating this crop of potentially stellar employees.

The final aspect of addressing human needs centers around how work is structured. Bright people want interesting projects that allow them to grow, experiment and explore. They do not want to be chained to the same program until death. Create learning opportunities by putting these people on taskforces and special projects. Encourage them to be active participants in professional associations, industry groups and other affiliations that stretch them. Highly motivated employees are looking for ways to contribute both to the organization and to the larger profession of which they are a part. Do not squelch their desire to be full contributors by locking them into mundane roles and responsibilities.

## The Mission

Whatever the focus of your agency, it has a mission—a driving purpose. Sought-after prospective employees are drawn to organizations that take their missions seriously. You know these organizations because every element of their operation is well-aligned with the

mission. They are clear about serving end-users well. They have a genuine commitment to enhancing service in their sector. These are driving factors in recruitment and retention. When employees experience a compelling mission that drives the work of the organization, they will invest. The reverse is also true; when the mission is nebulous and always in flux, it is difficult to garner interest and commitment.

There is more to be said about the mission. It must be relevant. It is striking how many public sector organizations have outdated, outmoded missions. Invest the time in a collaborative process to bring your mission into this century. Use the effort to inspire people to craft a mission that will enable you to fulfill your mandate. Use the process of mission redesign to engage people in creating a different future for the agency. This mission is far more than flowery words. It is, instead, a living statement of who and what you espouse to be. Having a viable mission that is realistic and makes sense in a contemporary work setting is an important tool for attracting the kind of people who can keep your succession pipeline full of talent.

Once your mission has been refined and systems aligned with it you are better able to use it to stimulate positive change. While few employees want to be in a workplace that is stagnant, few want to be in one where constant change is the norm. Use your mission to position change efforts that are sensible, well-planned and clearly articulated. This serves to create a framework for operating that will let people see how serious you, the leader, are, about having a meaningful mission that guides activities.

The focus on strategic activities is an essential one. Prospective employees look for organizations that have sensible functions which reflect congruence with the driving mission. If you are plagued with a lot of redundant functions, unnecessarily complex practices and other operational elements that defy logic, it will be difficult to get and keep first-rate employees. Your operation needs to reflect your strategic intent. Finely tuned, congruent functions make you more likely to become an employer of choice for the kind of people you seek to employ.

## The Vibe

Sharp prospective employees want to work in organizations with a healthy climate. That type of climate is characterized by open communication. Intelligent people who want to be engaged look for environments that have comfortable dialogue. They want to be able to have healthy disagreements, to share their insights and to work with managers who will listen to divergent opinions.

A healthy climate includes a degree of flexibility. While rules, regulations and policies are normative in the public sector, it is important to allow flexibility where possible. This is especially important when seeking to build innovation and to tap people who will be creative enough to make your dreams of innovation a reality for the organization. These potential employees do not want to be so constrained and confined by arcane rules and regulations. They want to be able to test, experiment and improvise.

An attractive organization also reflects a healthy array of diversity. Diversity extends far beyond race and gender. It should be understood to encompass national origin, religion, sexual orientation, language, socioeconomic status, education and many other factors. It includes a multiplicity of thoughts and approaches to work. It includes diversity in the ways that people express themselves and explore their interests related to the workplace. Climates that not only accept varied expressions of diversity, but also encourage these expressions, are more compelling than those that rely heavily on conformity and control.

A collaborative, collegial orientation toward the work also helps create the right vibe in the organization. Many of the prospective employees that you want to target desire a team-based work environment when they can work in tandem with other people. Find ways to reduce silos and fiefs so that your agency will reflect a cooperative environment that is committed to as many team-based practices as possible.

## Summary

The succession planning process begins with “right hiring.” This means selecting people who share the values and vision of your organization. Capturing these people requires a focus on three factors, the first of which is the human element: build systems and structures that honor and encourage the people who actually get the work done on a daily basis. The second factor is the mission. It is vital that you be led by a compelling mission that is clearly articulated. Additionally, every facet of the organization must be aligned with that mission. It cannot just be flowery propaganda. Your mission must have substance so that it can galvanize the talent in the organization. Finally, pay attention to the vibe of the organization. The climate is an essential element of what will get and keep the right people wanting to be a part of your organization.

It is important to remember that in even the worst economies, good people are highly sought. You can beat out competitors for the available talent by paying attention to these elements of the organization. Make sure that you correct misalignments and synchronize operations so that people want to invest their time, energy and talent in your organization.

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