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AS AN EXECUTIVE recruiting firm, our company invariably will hear from candidates the reasons why they are looking to make a change from their current company. And, while we have talked with literally thousands of candidates over the years, we find the 80/20 rule applies to reasons for candidates leaving. While there are a multitude of reasons given, 80 percent of candidates fall into the top 20 percent of reasons—reasons that we hear over and over.

Now why is this important to you, as a manager? Because, whether your company enjoys very little turnover or whether you have a serious problem with keeping your top performers, it is important to look at the causes for people leaving, especially your best people.

Some reasons, of course, can't really be controlled by you as a manager. If you head up a manufacturing company that is being sold, or if you're a manager at a lighting design firm going through massive layoffs, there's very little you can do. For the purpose of this article, though, we are talking about people leaving a company of their own volition. And there are four recurring reasons why employees become dissatisfied—reasons that you, as a manager, can control.

Whether you're a president, general manager, vice president of sales, director of engineering, principal of a design firm or vp of manufacturing, you know the challenge of not only motivating your people, but also keeping your best people is not always an easy one. The best people are continuously being courted by other companies, your competitors or recruiting firms. That said, many times top performers choose to stay where they are, often because the management of their company either accidentally or consciously operates in ways to neutralize the reasons we detail here.

Here are four of the primary reasons we hear from candidates as to why they wish to leave their current place of employment:

1. Hiring Manager/Mentor Leaves Company. This is a subtle one, but frequently causes the loss of good employees. Let's say you're the president of an HID fixture manufacturer and the manager who hired one of your top performers leaves the company, or is let go. It's important to be empathetic for that employee and make sure that the transition to the new manager is as smooth as possible, and to monitor the relationship between that employee and his/her new manager.

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2. Bonus/Incentive Plan Changes. This is a very subtle one but can have a real negative effect on some of your top people. This applies especially to salespeople and sales managers; usually a higher percentage of their income is based on incentives as opposed to employees in other departments. Because of that, your sales team will watch changes in their incentive plans extremely closely and are very wary of changes. Keep in mind that if your top sales people end up earning less (base and bonus combined) under your new plan, of if their salary stays the same but their incentive potential is reduced (or a cap is added), *you will experience problems*. At best, you'll have to deal with reduced motivation or lower morale. Worst case, you'll lose some employees you didn't plan (or want) to lose. And while your financial people can show you how on paper you may seem to save money, this doesn't account for the loss of top sales members (and the sales relationships they have and the sales volume they produce) if your plan doesn't fly in the field.

So, before you put that new sales plan into effect, it's not a bad idea to bring in one or two of your top sales representatives or managers to confidentially run your ideas past them. They can often provide suggestions to you for minor tweaks to the plan that you might never have thought of. If there are bugs in your proposed compensation overhaul, isn't it better to find out with an informal internal "focus group" than after you've implemented a plan that meets with mixed results?

There's the well-known example of the HID fixture manufacturer who revamped its entire compensation program, losing several key members of their sales team throughout the country in the process. Several years later, they've still never completely recovered in sales volume, from the damage to their reputation in the lighting community and from the stigma which still hampers their recruiting efforts. Obviously, there's nothing wrong with evaluating a compensation program or even looking for ways to increase your margins. But, if you end up losing some of your top sales people in the process, the drawbacks may outweigh the benefits.

3. No Real Advancement Potential. If you have no real desire to grow your company, be it a design firm or a manufacturer of decorative outdoor lighting, then this may not be a concern. You may accept the loss of key employees as just part of doing business. However, if you have definite growth plans for your company (as the majority of managers do), this should be an area of concern. This may seem obvious, but there are lighting companies out there who stay at the same sales volume year after year and yet don't seem to get this. They don't realize the sharper the candidate, the more important they have a visible path to more responsibility and higher-ranking positions (based on their results, of course).

This reason crops up most frequently with family owned and/or operated companies. Obviously, if you're a family company, you may have some limitations to the advancement of your people. If you're the president of a family company or key officer, it's important to realize how this often creates concerns for top performers.

However, there are steps you can take to avoid the family company syndrome and retain valued employees who are not related by blood or marriage. First, you must work hard to create a climate where favoritism is not a factor. Also, in the case of a difference of opinion (in a personality issue, a key decision, etc.), take great pains to make sure that the call you make is the fair and appropriate one. Your decision sometimes may make you unpopular with a member of your family, but if retaining good people is truly paramount to you, you've not only done the right thing for your business, but you've really made an impression on your (non-family) employee.

4. Broken Promises. There are a variety of broken promises. A common one is a promised next step that never materializes (for various reasons). The number one broken promise, however, is a partnership or equity that doesn't materialize. This most often happens, unfortunately, with lighting rep agencies. At the time of hire, in the "heat of courtship," a principal dangles the lure of an equity position or partnership within a given time frame. This unfortunately is used on the most desirable candidates, who invariably feel burned if you don't make good on your word. Our advice: Don't promise or dangle potential partnerships unless you're willing to put it in writing at the time of an offer, with a timeline.

Being aware of or avoiding these situations is a very big step in your retention of key members for your firm—thereby strengthening your company for the long haul.

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