



## Staff Retention

### *An ever-increasing problem*

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In the July 2008 *Insights*, I offered a few thoughts on leadership, including a definition from a book titled *The Art of Leadership*: “Expecting people to achieve beyond their own expectations and creating the environment for that to happen.” In this *Insights* I would like to expand on that definition as it relates to retention of your staff.

Retention is affected by many factors—both tangible and intangible—but one of the most important elements is passion. In Ayn Rand’s classic *Atlas Shrugged*, the character Dagny Taggart, in her search for meaning, talks with a group of businessmen who had retreated from an unwelcoming world to form their own community called Galt’s Gulch. They tell Taggart, “It’s not your obedience we seek, but your conviction.” That’s a good principle by which to lead your organization. If your management team and staff do not have a passion for their work and the success of your organization, then none of you will be fulfilled.

This passion begins with selecting your team and putting the right person in the right job. It continues with the creation of a work environment that will allow them to flourish—a place where:

- Managers and staff are satisfied and motivated
- The culture is one of respect, trust, and caring
- Personal and business growth are aligned
- Performance is recognized

An environment with these characteristics will go a long way toward improving staff retention.

### ***What really drives retention?***

Twice in my career, I took over a staff that was experiencing annual turnover in excess of 20 percent. The majority of the staff who remained was not motivated. They left work exactly on time, no one was willing to stay a bit longer to finish a specific task, and no one would spend the extra time to address emergency situations, e.g. when the payroll run hiccupped.

In both instances, one of my first tasks was to spend time with individuals and small groups, and to discuss the issues that were on the employees’ minds. (I would bring donuts and coffee for hour-long meetings with groups of about six employees.) I found

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that the number one reason the staff were looking for work elsewhere was that they lacked confidence in management. They were also dissatisfied by the lack of challenging work and lack of recognition. All of these problems were fixable. It was interesting to note that salary was not identified as a key reason for wanting to leave. Only a few of the staff indicated that low compensation was a factor in considering looking for other employment.

### ***What does it take?***

When you consider that the primary reason to hire staff in the first place is to delegate work and leverage their skills and capabilities, employee perceptions about a lack of challenging assignments are especially jarring. IT organizations with high retention rates among valued employees exhibit the following traits:

- A cohesive management team with a shared focus
- Alignment of the right people in the right jobs
- Maximized leadership strengths with resources focused on strategic priorities
- An efficient, productive organizational structure which can be leveraged to enhance growth and support operations
- Business and clinical goals linked to position responsibilities, performance metrics, and reward systems
- Emphasis on teamwork and accountability
- Focus on attracting, retaining, developing, and rewarding talent
- Celebration of successes

These are the components of an energized IT management and staff culture that must be envisioned, developed, and managed by you. It is not automatic.

### ***Creating a culture***

Organizational culture is one of those “soft and squishy” concepts that make some CIOs queasy. It’s also one of the primary drivers of staff satisfaction and turnover. It boils down to answering the question, “What’s it like to work here?”

When it’s working well, culture is the key element that holds the organization together, gives everyone a common identity, and drives commitment and behavior. The keys to managing culture are:

- Knowing what the current culture is—*getting feedback*
- Knowing what the desired culture should be
- Clearly defining and communicating both
- Committing to a lengthy process of change



- Tying all factors and functions together
- Continuous monitoring
- Ensuring that change is valued

## ***Managing the culture***

One of the challenges for a CIO is the idea that every person whom he/she employs becomes a friend or that the entire organization is “family.” This sounds pleasant, but it’s crucial to remember that you are the designated leader and not employed to be a friend. In fact, in such environments, common staff refrains include “No one is in charge,” “There is no leadership,” and “There are no consequences for non-performance.”

And if your so-called “friends”—the people in your organization whom you cannot easily confront—fail to deliver what is expected of them, they obviously don’t regard the friendship as highly as you do. Oddly enough, they are frequently the same people likely to be annoyed with you because you’re not setting boundaries and holding them accountable.

In an article I read in *Parenting* magazine a few years ago, it noted how each successive generation of parents has become more permissive in rearing its children. Today’s parents proudly boast about this warm and fuzzy quality that had been absent in their own childhood, even as they whine about how incorrigible their kids have become. Many CIOs apply this same theory to managing and leading their staff.

In an ideal world, you would have created a workplace in which motivated people can manage themselves, but the reality is that most employees need some structure, focus, and reinforcement—at least some of the time. Having structure doesn’t mean you can’t have a happy, fun, cheerful, and even relaxed environment. But the absence of processes, protocols, measurements, and evaluations will lead to dysfunction.

A culture can often be supported or undermined by the informal leaders of an organization—people who may not be in key management positions, but rather have defined their role by the way they relate to other staff members. Some are terrific informal leaders, while others are “difficult.”

Recognizing what’s troubling your staff and how you relate to them may help you deal with employees you regard as difficult. I have found that people who challenged me were often intelligent, driven, and dynamic individuals whose energy and creativity became an asset. It was worth the time to harness that energy, and in several instances they became my better staff members. On the other hand, don’t rule out the possibility that you may indeed have a jerk or two working for you, in which case there may be nothing you can do except to kick them out. Your obligation as a leader and CIO is to assess whether the person is a chronic problem or whether the attitude is justified and fixable; sometimes this determination is difficult to make.

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## **No time to waste**

With the frenzy created by the federal mandates, competition for scarce talent is at an all-time high. It is more important than ever to create an IT environment that is an asset when recruiting, a wealth of imagination and ingenuity to serve your constituents, and one that inspires staff members to commit to your vision rather than searching for the next job.

I mentioned earlier that I had twice inherited staff that were experiencing over 20 percent annual turnover. I am not suggesting I have all the answers. I have no formal training in human relations. But I do know how I would like to be treated and that can be a very strong influence. In both instances, after the first full year on the job, we were able to reduce staff turnover to four percent and three percent, respectively. That was enough to convince a guy like me that spending some time on the "soft and squishy" can pay off.

Good luck.

Tally Ho!

Ward