

Retaining Talent: Strategies for Success

By Scott J. Cameron, IPMA-CP

For any agency, mission success hinges on having the right people in the right place at the right time with the right skills. It is a real challenge to find and hire the right people. Once they are found, and have agreed to join your organization, a manager does not want to lose them. Taking the necessary steps to retain talent is therefore one of the primary functions of a supervisor, and should be one of the strategic priorities of executives in any organization.



Follow the Money

For all levels of government, there is another very compelling bureaucratic reason to retain talent in the current fiscal climate—you risk losing both the person and their salary budget. While a supervisor views an unexpected vacancy as a disappointment, a budgeteer sees the same event as an opportunity to potentially scoop up unexpectedly uncommitted salary funds that might be re-purposed somewhere else. Loss of valued talent might not only pose a temporary risk of reduced organizational performance, it may also raise the specter of a permanent loss of capacity, if the budget goes away along with the employee and a replacement cannot be hired.

In addition to the mission and budget risks associated with attrition, it costs the agency money to replace departing employees. A study by Retention Associates suggests that the cost of replacing an employee's salary is 30-50 percent of the annual salary of the entry-level employee, and substantially higher for mid-level or higher level employees. The cost of replacing lost employees represents an unnecessarily high budget for the agency's HR function, especially when that money could be spent on the mission.

Supervision is Key to Retention

Good supervisors are the key to employee retention. A good supervisor provides meaningful and challenging work, regular and timely constructive feedback, opportunities for growth and advancement, and a healthy work environment. Studies show that employees leave an organization because of an experience with a bad supervisor, rather than being disenchanted with the broader organization.

To reduce unwanted attrition, agencies must select and cultivate good supervisors. There is a longstanding debate in the leadership literature about whether good leaders are born or made, nature versus nurture. The truth is probably somewhere in between. Some people are born with a personality that predisposes them to be effective leaders in certain group situations. If they have the right developmental experiences in childhood and early adulthood, then those tendencies can blossom. They seemingly end up as captain of their high school field hockey team, get elected to student council in college, and stand out in the crowd in their first job. These people are easy to identify and select for supervisory positions. However, for the rest of us, who may not have been blessed by nature, there is still an opportunity to achieve a commendable level of managerial skill – *with proper cultivation*. It is also worth noting that even the “natural born leader” requires a set of learned skills to be optimally effective.

This leads us to two points about supervisor selection. First, supervisors should be selected primarily for their demonstrated or their potential skills with people. People should not be placed in supervisory positions because they are the best technician in the group. Indeed, there is some evidence to suggest that there may even be a slight negative correlation between technical aptitude and people skills.

At age 22, shortly after beginning my MBA program, my first exam in graduate school was in managerial accounting. The entire class bombed the test. We all knew it, and very soon, so did the professor. When he came back to class to return our exams, he must have noticed the morbid, even funereal atmosphere in the classroom. All of these formerly high achievers were laid low by a few debits and credits. So he told us a story he read in the *Harvard Business Review*. The Harvard Business School had done a study of its graduates, a few years after they left, to find out how they fared in their careers. Somewhat to the author's surprise, it was discovered the alumni who have risen to CEO positions, were disproportionately likely to have been C-students at Harvard. Working as vice presidents tended to be the B-students, while the former A-students were more likely to have taken highly specialized analytical roles in the bowels of their organizations. His message was that one didn't need to get an A in accounting to be a success in life.

I don't recall whether I was more relieved at the time that I wouldn't necessarily end up a professional failure, or disappointed that I was not a shoo-in to be a CEO. In any case, the message that had been driven home very forcefully was that technical experts didn't always make the best managers. Later in my career, I had the opportunity to work in agencies populated by employees with strong scientific, engineering and other technical backgrounds. I saw first-hand the problems that too often happen when the senior technician is promoted into a supervisory role. An agency was better off promoting people with more people skills than technical skills into those roles.

Supervisory Training Critical

The second point is that managers and supervisors often need training and

development, if they are to succeed in their roles. This is especially true for those who are making their first leap into a managerial position. This is not a simple transition to make in any organization, public or private. Formal training is a key ingredient to helping a new supervisor succeed. Formal training is particularly important for the new public sector supervisor. Civil service rules tend to be more numerous and more rigid than the personnel management regime a supervisor encounters in the private sector. In other words, there are far more ways a public sector supervisor, who is unfamiliar with the rules, can find himself in trouble. Effective training can provide the baseline information needed to avoid the obvious pitfalls. More importantly, it can accelerate a new supervisor down the path of self-awareness and team-building that can lay the foundation for ultimate managerial success. Supervisors should receive periodic training to help them hone their managerial skills and enhance their effectiveness over time.

Once an agency has in place a system to identify, select and cultivate promising supervisors and managers, there are several other steps an agency can take to improve employee retention.

Onboarding is a Process, Not an Event

According to the U.S. Office of Personnel Management's research, new employees decide within their first 30 days on the job whether or not they feel comfortable in their new work environment. After six months, they have typically decided whether they are going to stay in their position. This means that the agency needs to do a better job of onboarding the new employee, if the employee is going to be retained.

It is not enough to drop a lot of forms and other paperwork on the new employee. Every aspect of the initial work experience needs to be carefully choreographed. The HR function in the agency can play a major role in the

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success of onboarding. HR needs to understand that its role does not stop at the point where the employee has made it onto the payroll system and benefits have been selected. The department needs to be ready with an onboarding checklist for the supervisor, well before the new employee walks in the door. Moreover, HR needs to actively engage the supervisor to ensure that nothing on that checklist falls through the cracks. Items on that checklist should include:

- Identification of office space for the employee.
- Ready technology for the new employee, so they can quickly be productive.
- A clear roadmap of what to expect the first day, week and month of employment.
- An introduction to the other people in the workplace that the employee will be interacting with regularly.
- Initial discussion of performance expectations.
- Initial discussion of the employee's Individual Development Plan, to signal that the agency has a long-term vision for the employee.
- Identification of a peer mentor, who can help the new employee feel comfortable.
- Identification of an older and more experienced mentor, who can help acculturate the new employee.
- The schedule for any mandatory training, such as IT security, ethics and a formal orientation program.

Onboarding needs to be thought of as a process that extends over the course of at least the employee's first year in the agency. Employees cannot be taken for granted at any time, especially not during their first year on the job. HR can help keep the supervisor focused on the extended onboarding process. A solid onboarding program and quality supervision will contribute greatly to high employee engagement.

The opportunity to make progress on meaningful work has been identified by researchers as the single greatest factor in employee engagement. An engaged employee is one who is fully involved and works enthusiastically to further the organization's interests. An engaged employee is highly likely to be retained by the agency. Part of a supervisor's job is to provide meaningful work, which can be a little challenging in any bureaucracy. In such a setting, progress is often slow. On the other hand, public sector employees tend to strongly associate with the agency's mission. Providing office-based employees with a chance to be invigorated by periodically getting out into the field where the agency's mission is actually delivered to the public can be an invigorating experience that boosts engagement.

A combination of skilled supervisors, effective onboarding processes and the opportunity to do meaningful work together will go far in helping agencies retain their best and brightest.

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