

Key Career Conversations Your Managers Need to Have Now

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Retention Surveys are Gloomy

An Adecco American Workplace Insights Survey conducted by Harris Polls found that *half the workers* surveyed are at least somewhat likely to look for a new job once the economy has turned around. Surveys confirm that *two-thirds* (66%) of American workers are neither satisfied with their compensation nor contributions to retirement plans. Additionally, about *four out of five* American workers are unsatisfied with their company's past retention efforts and *three quarters* are not satisfied about future career growth opportunities at their company. Furthermore, *half* of all workers are unsatisfied with the level of support received from their managers.

Endemic mass reductions in workforce and economic stress have pushed many workers to re-assess their jobs. Cost-cutting measures have generated sharp declines in morale and commitment. Some have lost confidence in their organization's chances to succeed. Others question the strategy, decisions and vision of their leaders. They have become disillusioned. More importantly, they are questioning their own career choices, re-calculating their chances for advancement and evaluating paths and opportunities available to pursue a solid career within their organizations.

A recent Watson Wyatt Employee Survey illustrates that engagement levels for all workers have dropped 9% since last year and close to 25% for top performers. Additionally, *one third* of all top performers say their employer's situation has worsened in the past 12 months and they are less confident in management's ability to grow the business. "The fallout from the actions employers have taken in response to the recession is now coming to light, and it's significant," said Director Laura Sejen, at Watson Wyatt. "Having less engaged and committed workers is a major concern for employers. This could have a long-lasting and detrimental impact on productivity, quality and customer service, as well as an increase in the risk of companies losing their best employees." See: <http://www.watsonwyatt.com/> Companies are especially vulnerable to losing their top achievers. It's the most costly talent to replace who leave an organization, - not the average assembly-line-Joe or Jacinta. Where will you be when your competition starts hiring your best employees? Will your organization have retained your best talent to compete in this recovering economy or will you be sitting in a conference room with a bunch of disgruntled, lack-luster, left-over-workers?

The Most Pressing Issues

According to survey after survey, leaders and managers are facing a retention disaster, particularly for top performers. The surveys are especially a startling eye-opener for organizations that have sacrificed employee retention in the name of cost containment. Cutting staff to increase the bottom line will have its price. Managers had better start engaging their best employees in conversations to resolve their issues right now or they are likely to be talking to empty rooms.

Managers and employees need to address the most pressing issues head-on. Surveys reveal that the most pressing concerns among the workforce center around:

- (1) compensation and contributions to retirement plans;
- (2) dissatisfaction with retention efforts, career growth opportunities, and the levels of management support;

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- (3) issues surrounding the decisions of leaders; and
- (4) chances for advancement, i.e., the paths and opportunities available to pursue a career inside the company.

Some Solutions

Problematic times can provide a lightning rod to boost engagement, build morale, increase dialogue, and create mutual trust. Leaders and managers can turn issues of dissatisfaction into topics of hope and resolution. The right dialogue can go a long way to demystify dissatisfaction. For example, if compensation or retirement contributions can't be addressed because of the economy, set up an awards program or team contests with small bonuses for the winners. Recognizing outstanding workers or workers of the month postings will improve employee moral and will temporarily alleviate some dissatisfaction surrounding compensation issues.

Dollars and cents are not the only way to improve satisfaction. Through dialogue, managers must acquaint employees with the reasons behind compensation problems so that they can grow to understand how temporary adjustments can help them continue to be employed and to help companies get through hard times.

If employees won't approach managers to have conversations about the issues that concern them, managers have to engage employees in career conversations that go directly to the issues highlighted in the dissatisfaction surveys. "Particularly for companies looking to reduce an exodus of top talent," said Bernadette Kenny, chief career officer, Adecco Group North America. "What workers are telling us is that even during a recession, just having a job does not equate to job satisfaction. Employers need to be conscious of the concerns their staff is [facing] on a daily basis and proactively come up with the appropriate solutions to improve retention and reduce the current and future high cost of turnover." Sep 2, 2009, Adecco Labor Day Survey Finds Majority of Workers Dissatisfied.

See: <http://www.adeccousa.com/AboutUs/pressroom/Pages/Press-release.aspx?id=109&url=/pressroom/pressreleases/pages/forms/allitems.aspx>

Managers should try to make employees see and understand what the organization is doing to retain staff. Unless the company's initiatives are patently visible to workers, the effort will go undervalued. Employees and managers need to have conversations about retention. Dialogue will go a long way in building mutual trust. Managers should give an honest view of the company's circumstances and engage their employees in the realities of the business challenges and competition. For example, managers should map out a growth plan for employees and communicate it to their teams. Employees will then understand that managers are invested in their future and they'll be more confident in investing their time and careers with the organization.

We have heard time and again that every employee is personally in charge of his or her own career. But career development takes a joint effort between manager and employee. If an employee doesn't initiate a conversation about issues that bother him or her, managers should take the bull by the horns and initiate the conversation. Leaders and managers should make every effort to ask every employee to come forward and talk about their issues. Dialogue is the key to building retention.

Conversation is the Key

Employers need to be proactive and be prepared to address dissatisfaction issues to improve retention. Career conversations are key, but many leaders and managers are overwhelmed during these difficult times and unable to find time to embrace insightful career conversations. Leaders should continuously encourage managers and employees to meet with one another to have career conversations. Employees

need to be fully prepared to talk about the issues in the areas of their dissatisfaction, but they should address their strengths, contributions, ambitions and similar issues so that they speak with confidence and managers will appreciate their skills.

The best way to get to know an employee (and to help one understand him/herself better) is to ask powerful questions. Appropriate questions will prompt thinking and self-reflection. If you ask the right questions, employees realize that you are prepared and know that you care, which establishes confidence and trust. Both of you will learn new things about one another that will establish a bond of respect and open doors of opportunity. It's not until you really know someone that you're able to give advice as to options and next steps available to help craft a career.

The process will eventually bring each employee to ask five underlying questions. How am I unique? What are my capabilities? How is the world of work changing? What are my aspirations? How can I accelerate my learning? These questions will guide you in your discussions about a future for your employee.

You can't give advice to employees on options if you don't know the individual's interests, skills, passion and aspirations. Together, you should thoroughly explore topics "How am I Unique" and "How is the World of Work Changing." Employee career choices must be related to the changes that can be predicted in the industry, profession and organization. Once you both jointly SEE and understand these elements, new goals will appear on the horizon, such as, a new project or position or change to another division or profession, etc. that couples uniqueness to opportunity.

Starting a Conversation

If you start a conversation thoughtfully and for a purpose, you'll be amazed at the conversational journey you open up. There are five critical keys to opening an effective career conversation with an employee.

They are the five A's: Appreciate, Assess, Anticipate, Align, and Accelerate.

1. **Appreciate uniqueness** – help employees to recognize their unique talents, skills, abilities, personality traits, passion and accomplishments to make career choices that fit.
2. **Assess capabilities** – help employees to discover their capabilities, build reputation, and assess individual and team performance in order to build strong networks in their industry, organization, profession, job and personal life.
3. **Anticipate the future** – help employees consider and anticipate future trends in an industry, organization and profession and how the trends will affect future choices.
4. **Align aspirations** – help ensure that individuals see how their aspirations, talent, goals and passion are in "sync" with the mission, goals and strategies of the organization.
5. **Accelerate learning** – connect individuals to mentors, projects, and learning opportunities to help achieve their goals and support long-term organization strategies.

Share your own concerns and challenges with employees where appropriate. There's an organic life to these questions that can open up thoughts about your own future choices. You'll see how questions provide some nice soul-searching for you and open some doors in thinking about your own abilities and future aspirations. You'll be surprised to discover where these questions will take you and your employees.

Draw on your prior knowledge about each of your direct reports to determine which of the five "A's" are the most important for you to pursue in your career conversation. Construct your questions within each of the above five topics. You will find that discussion in one area will usually take you to insights in other areas. Follow the flow of the conversation and trust the organic nature of thinking together.

If you don't know the answer, tell your employee. Tell the truth. Don't pretend you know. Don't make up stuff. Don't make promises you can't keep. Turn your lack of knowledge into a joint exploration and shared experience. Talk about working together to get an answer. Have a discussion where the two of you can figure out how best to answer difficult questions.

Never lose sight that your career conversations are aimed at building, motivating and developing employees. Career conversations help open doors for career choices, build trust, and engage people to realize the mission and strategies of your organization.

Anticipate Tough Questions

There will always be some tough questions that employees may throw you. If you don't have immediate answers, postpone answering and suggest revisiting those issues later or try brainstorming answers with your employee. **Prepare yourself for questions such as:**

- When can I expect a bigger payday and better contributions to my retirement plan?
- What are you doing about keeping our workforce intact?
- What career growth opportunities do I have in this company?
- What is management doing to support my needs and aspirations?
- What are the facts supporting decisions of leaders?
- What are my chances for advancement?
- What opportunities are available to me to pursue a career inside the company?
- Will my job be here tomorrow or in six months?
- What options do I have to be secure at work?
- How can I possibly achieve my career goals in this organization?

Be ready. Place yourself in the shoes of your employees and anticipate their concerns. It's more important to anticipate the questions than have all the answers. The object is to create an honest and authentic dialogue with your employees. Engage them and they will stay engaged.

About the Author:

Caela Farren, Ph.D., is President of MasteryWorks - a leading Career Development solution to large to mid-size companies, including Sprint, Lockheed-Martin, and Capitol One. MasteryWorks provides enterprise web portals, training, consulting, and an assessment framework for employees and managers. For more than 30 years, Caela has been a tireless advocate around complex issues redefining the workplace. She envisioned the current workplace climate by more than a decade, when she published the book, "Who is Running Your Career: Creating Stable Work in Unstable Times" (Bard Press, 1997). Through MasteryWorks, she oversees solutions that create the foundation for impact-filled "career conversations" - centered on increased contribution, performance, and fit. Her strategic approach consistently delivers on employee engagement and retention goals for her clients.

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