



4 Imperatives to Retaining Top Performers

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Have you ever thought “I need to find another job.” Or had one of your top performing employees find another job? If you’ve been in the workforce very long, of course you have. Everyone gets restless at some point. People get tired of doing the same task or job on a repeated basis. People lose interest in what they do or who they work for. They want to try something new and different that (at least initially) seems more exciting and fulfilling. They want to escape that accumulating list of outstanding to-dos that could all be erased like an Etch-a-Sketch if they changed jobs.

When you think about changing jobs or why your top performers may be thinking about moving on, what is the problem being solved or the opportunity being gained by changing jobs? Is it more money? A more prestigious title? A better boss or better job? If you thought of money, your reason isn’t the most common one. Yes people want to be fairly compensated, but studies on employee retention find that compensation is rarely the primary concern. The issue is more often that people lose their hope for a better future. They feel they have stagnated, stopped growing, or stopped advancing in their career. They no longer feel challenged or motivated.

If over time you and your team don’t feel you are improving and making substantial progress toward something worthwhile, you probably feel you are going backwards. If you don’t feel you are adding value, creating value, or making a positive difference, you probably feel the need to move on, start over, or find a bigger challenge somewhere else. That’s actually the good news. If you are stagnant and don’t think about seeking a new way to learn and grow, your other alternative is to become apathetic and accept stagnation—clearly not a characteristic of top performance.

Top performers want to be challenged. They want to achieve something meaningful. They want to grow in their knowledge, develop their skills, build relationships, and feel they contributed. If they find themselves in a job that offers little growth opportunity, they start looking for a different job. They won’t tolerate a boring, repetitive, or unchallenging job that provides little feeling of accomplishment. You might think you can keep a top performer in a dull job through additional compensation, but compensation is a short-lived retention mechanism at best. Top performers can earn a good wage anywhere. They choose where to work for other reasons. They know their true value and ultimate net worth is based more on their knowledge, skills, network, and accomplishments than on their current paycheck.

To keep your top performers (and yourself) engaged in the work of your organization, not only pay them fairly for their contributions, ensure they are: 1) growing their knowledge, 2) developing their skills, 3) expanding their network, and 4) feeling a sense of accomplishment. If you don’t, someone else will.

Here are eight principles to follow that help ensure these four imperatives are achieved:

1. Let people know you believe in them and their potential. Get them excited about what they can learn and who they can become. Understand their career aspirations. Talk about the types of experiences, knowledge, and skills they need to be successful.
2. Help them set realistic but challenging goals that support the organization’s objectives as well as their own. Ensure their goals are meaningful and ones they intrinsically aspire to achieve. Help them target the enabling qualities required to reach their long-term aspirations.
3. Ensure people’s work is interesting, challenging, and satisfying. Empower them with responsibilities that provide a sense of satisfaction when completed. Be specific about expectations and desired outcomes so it is clear when the outcomes are reached.



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4. Coach people. Meet with them regularly to discuss and review their progress. Give attention to their business as well as professional development goals. Talk about their challenges. Help them overcome their obstacles. Enable them with any needed resources. Ask questions that guide them in making good decisions on what to do next.
5. Provide them with learning and application opportunities. Help them find training programs and seminars to attend. Provide short educational sessions in your staff meetings. Provide them with special assignments. Identify books for them to read. Help them practice and apply what they are learning.
6. Ensure people feel a sense of contribution. Praise and recognize not only their results, but their effort and can-do attitude. Tie their contributions to the success of the overall organization. Point out specifically how their knowledge, skills, effort, attitude, network, or accomplishments helped the team reach the team's goals.
7. Give them visibility. Help them know that others value their contributions. Create opportunities for them to showcase their work to other managers and executives. Help them publish their work in newsletters or industry periodicals. Assist them in securing speaking opportunities at industry conferences. Introduce them to other top performers who they can enjoy working with.
8. Exhort them to continually raise their level of contribution. Keep raising your expectations and theirs. Challenge them to think big and set new goals when their old ones are achieved. Celebrate their accomplishments, but don't let them become too comfortable. Keep exhorting them and holding them accountable to reaching the next level of performance.

P.S. If you are young in your career (or coaching someone young in their career), learning and development is particularly important. Don't focus on the money. Seek challenging assignments that provide the best opportunities to increase your knowledge, expand your abilities, grow your network, and achieve meaningful outcomes. Do these well and the money will come in abundance later.

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