

Your employees want to leave, why should you care?



By Tara Orchard

A client recently related a story to me about a company meeting where the CEO, while giving his usual update and rah-rah motivational speech, announced to the employees that if people were not happy and were looking for other jobs they were welcome to walk out the door. He stated that he only wanted people who were committed 100% to his company. Another client recently showed me her offer of employment which included an agreement saying she must commit 100% of her time and energy to the focus of the employer and if she wanted to seek outside projects she would need permission from the department director. This was for a job that was less than 20 hours per week.

A recent CNNMoney.com article by Chris Isidore has a very interesting title, "Take this job and tolerate it." The article quotes research from American Express that found over 54% of people surveyed would make significant concessions to hold on to their job. The same article includes research by Towers Watson that showed 86% of employees value job security and stability more than anything, which is fascinating data considering that a survey by Right Management found that 86% of employees want to leave their jobs. That does not mean they will, just that they want to. In fact, the Towers Watson research also found that only 12% of workers were actually planning to leave. It seems that almost everyone wants to leave but instead just sticks around and sucks it up. Not a formula for the most innovative and productive workplace is it?

Today, we frequently hear it said that employees are burnt out and barely hanging in; there are reported increases in adult mental health challenges, family breakdowns, suicide and addiction among North American workers since the beginning of the Great

Recession. Not everyone has struggled but many, many have. And while this is happening we are also reading article after article telling us about the importance of workplace emotional intelligence (EI). I know this first hand because I have been writing some of those articles. Many employers are also seeking to hire employees who can demonstrate EI or are trying to cultivate it in existing ones. I also know this first hand because I have been screening new employees and working with managers and their teams to identify and develop EI in themselves and their employees.

EI in the workplace is indeed an important skill set. With well-developed EI skills your employees are better able to manage their stress, build better workplace relationships, adapt to changes and more. It is also useful to keep in mind that unlike IQ, EI is a skill that does not peak in the 20s, but increases with age and experience. We may think we see EI in younger workers, but in reality their EI often has much less breadth and depth. That means that the older workers who often face a higher risk of burnout also have a better chance of having the EI you are seeking for the long term.

Although we desire more workplace EI, we have ended up creating workplaces where workers feel trapped in jobs, where they do not feel valued, where they are working in teams of people who are scared about holding onto their jobs and working for employers who want EI in their employees but are not always willing to facilitate it. And we also hear the cry from Canadian economists that the Canadian workplace is not innovative or productive enough. Yet it is difficult to be innovative and productive when you are scared and focused on holding the line.

This all takes me back to the original question; why should you care? If, like the first CEO, your attitude is I do not want you if you do not want me, then perhaps you are failing to understand the true cost of employees wanting to leave. In reality, an employee committed 100% to an employer is, in the long run, not an emotionally healthy person. Now, you may say to me wait a minute, 'of course we want 100% commitment'. But, in reality, you want 100% commitment at times when it is needed, not all the time, because employees who are 100% committed to you are not committed to themselves, their own health, their own development, family and more. An employee who is 100% committed to you and scared about their job will eventually make mistakes, lash out at others or turn in on themselves, not every day, but possibly at critical moments. If a person is not in touch with meeting his own needs he is more likely to fail to maintain his composure under stress or bounce back after a defeat.

Perhaps our first CEO would say that is fine, but he doesn't want people who cannot maintain composure under stress or bounce back quickly enough. Here is where it gets interesting, in the end we are all people and part of who we are and how we succeed is that we learn through adversity and by our mistakes. As people our greatest ideas and innovations often result from our mistakes and struggles. When you toss out the employee who makes a mistake you toss out the employee who has had the opportunity to learn from his mistake. When you toss out the employee who struggles you toss out the ability of other employees to develop their own EI skills because empathy is part of emotional intelligence. You cannot cultivate EI in a workplace by failing to understand all aspects of it. People have moments when their EI fails them. If that employee is in a workplace that truly understands EI then he knows he can take a breath, be mindful and re-focus, demonstrating both composure and resilience. This is a workplace that creates an environment where innovation and productivity are more than possible.

When your employees want to leave, whether or not they do, they are telling you something about your workplace. I am not suggesting that you seek out employees without emotional intelligence. I am suggesting that sometimes you have to look beyond the surface and see the entire picture because you never know when the person

who leaves or wants to leave may just be the person who had the ability to deliver what you needed the day after he left the building. That is why you should care that your employees want to leave and not be so quick to show them the door.

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