The Kept On Workforce: Engaging the New Survivors

BY BEVERLY KAYE

IT'S IRONIC.

The economic effects of these past months have caused many organizations to downsize, restructure, and freeze hiring efforts and budgets. All these actions are directed at stabilizing organizational performance, but they are simultaneously causing companies to unwittingly lose the energy of many loyal, talented, and hard-working employees who still remain…the very people that the organization is now relying on for success! After the economic dust settles, employees who have managed to keep their jobs often find themselves feeling worse than those who were forced out. While laid-off workers are struggling to reclaim their professional lives, the "kept-on" workers (those who survive a transition) are coping with another kind of stress. They find themselves simply surviving, not thriving. And they are ready to bail to improve their plight when the economy shifts or opportunities arise. This article is about them.

Have Job, Will Travel

Common belief is that the "kept on" workers should be glad they still have a job - no matter what it is - and the assumption is that they'll stay on, heads down, compliant and quiet…regardless of what we ask of them or how they're treated. Well, something happened a few years ago that changed the workforce forever. Employees had a chance to be in the driver's seat. In a very tight labor market, they were showered with all kinds of perks -- sign-on bonuses, concierge service, on-site daycare, fitness centers, flexible work schedules. Their managers who were accustomed to using an authoritarian style were suddenly reminded about manners. Command and control was out. Conversations were in! Employees knew they didn't have to go back to the "bad old days" no matter what. It happened before, and it's happening again.

The new survivors are working as much for themselves as they are for the organization and what looks like a full labor market isn't going to change it. Good talent will always be marketable. The new survivors are willing to leave and will keep their eyes on other options-always! And it takes talent to build talent. A commitment to growing talent requires training and development to ensure the talent pipeline is always full and at the ready.

Valuable Lessons

"If my company doesn't grow me…If my manager doesn't respect my values…If my company doesn't share information…If there's no opportunity for development here." If the organization isn't taking these actions, employees notice.

Employees today want more than survival. They expect meaningful work, growth and development, and respect for their differences. They expect to feel needed and appreciated. They expect competitive rewards, recognition and a say in what happens to them. They expect to feel valued and engaged.

The Kept on Workforce

- ✓ Dissatisfied?
- ✓ Disinterested?
- ✓ Disengaged?
- ✓ Distrustful?
- ✓ Disaffected?
- ✓ Disconnected?

Kept on employees know they are important to the organization, or else why would they be among those retained? They also have learned valuable lessons about the realities of contemporary employee-employer relationships and they're working hard at re-tooling their careers, their development plans, and surfing the job boards. They are valuable contributors who actively seek a match between the contributions they make and the future they carve out for themselves -- inside the organization or out.

And, they're the future of the organization. The skills and experience they bring to the workplace can make the difference between meeting forecasts or not. And these employees are going to take care of themselves in the process of building your organization, given certain immutable realities.

Reality #1: The Shortage Factor. Despite the fact that some Boomers may stay longer, the US Bureau of Labor Statistics still reports a labor shortage of several million and a skill shortage in math and science.

Reality #2: The Reciprocity Clause. Organizational loyalty and commitment are not a thing of the past, they're just not a "given" anymore. Today's definition of the employee contract has a reciprocity clause. "We'll stay loyal to each other as long as we both benefit. If the work isn't challenging, meaningful and growth-focused, talented people will find those things elsewhere." The Internet job boards still beckon with choices online, 24 hours a day.

Reality #3: The Satisfaction Connection. Engaged employees stay longer and are more productive, and clearly a direct affect on the bottom line. Employers that value their workers experience lower turnover and higher engagement. Lower turnover results in higher productivity. Satisfied employees satisfy customers.

Reality #4: The "Choice" Award. The true "employer of choice" is not just the organization; it's the manager too. If we're to keep talent, we need to grow talent and every manager must be development-minded and skilled in being a talent magnet. It takes talent to build talent and the new survivor can tell the difference.

Discretionary Effort: Not For Sale At Any Price

If an employee is disengaged, dissatisfied, disinterested, distrustful, disaffected and disconnected, they will withhold the most important "dis" word of all…their discretionary effort. The difficulty with discretionary effort is that it's not for sale. Each employee has his/her own amount and is the sole decision-maker on whether or not it is donated to your organization or to something or someone else's. Managers can motivate employees in the short-term to increase productivity, but generally there's a cost to the motivation effort -- some kind of reward must be attached. Results of this form of motivation are generally short-lived.

We've all worked for managers who have inspired us -- those for whom we gave 150%. They didn't have to ask us for it. We worked late, raised the bar, got creative around solutions and didn't flip the off-switch at the end of the day. We can also point to managers for whom the same people performed at a minimum acceptable level to gain a satisfactory rating. What's the difference? It's the manager's relationship with each individual contributor that makes the difference.

Each staff member has a contribution to make, and each manager greatly impacts that contribution. The manager contributes to the decision-making process by how they coach their workers through organizational changes, increased workload and decreased opportunities.

Engaging The New Survivors

Engagement has become the "in" word. Everyone is studying it, reporting on it, and measuring it. It is now labeled as an important factor in an organization's ability to grow and increase market share. But engagement is a process, not a program. When managers are not held accountable for career and development needs of the people they work with, we lose an incredible competitive advantage.

Just as a smart investor looks beyond individual stocks to understand the big picture of an industry or market, the new survivors want to see a return on their investment. They want to not only improve existing skills but also develop new skills that can make them more marketable. They want to build portfolios that reflect a broad perspective with an eye toward long-term employability.

While they network, learn, take on new assignments, and absorb an increased workload, they also contribute to the organization by approaching their current work with energy and enthusiasm.

Short-Term Investments Buy Short-Term Talent

Regardless of market conditions or your organization's financial condition, it's a big mistake to stop investing in talent development. Maximize the contributions of all employees by providing them with skills, opportunities for growth and learning, plus the resources to increase their opportunities within the organization. Here are some ideas for managers who want to keep their investment in talent alive:

- ***Be candid about the market.*** Don't ignore what has occurred with the "business-as-usual" frame of reference. Talk to those you've retained candidly about their situation and future.

- ***Co-create an investment plan.*** Engage them by involving them fully in goal-setting and plans for restructuring and reorganizing. Co-create the plans so they don't design their own in isolation. Just don't do the task for them.

- ***Re-establish value.*** Each laid-off employee creates an attitude shift in each retained employee. Values may change and need realignment. Train the managers of this kept on workforce to dialogue with their teams in ways that can re-establish their sense of value and importance to the company.

- ***Build Networks.*** Managers can help their surviving employees network with others to find support and development. They need help seeking mentors, coaches and advisors. They need help from others in similar positions.

Keep an open door and an open mind. Managers and leaders must talk with employees to re-engage, re-connect, re-invent and re-ignite employee trust, loyalty and purpose. A new perspective on kept on employees and a new sense of reciprocity will result in a more loyal, committed and productive workforce poised to roll up their sleeves and do better than survive - to thrive