

10 Ways to Lose Your Top People

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Do you wake up at night worrying that your top people may leave?

Good. Peter Drucker has been quoted as saying “...*the purpose of a business is to create customers*” but it is impossible to do that if you don’t have the right people on the team to make it happen.

How to keep your top people is a very complex topic and there are no easy answers. Effective management requires sound management techniques as well as strong leadership. The management aspect is science with well documented methods that can be objectively applied. On the other hand, leadership is an art where there are also volumes of literature, but applying the knowledge therein is much more difficult and subjective. So to assist you in your quest to develop your artistic abilities of leadership, here are 10 (plus a bonus 1) ways I have observed that organisations can rapidly lose good people. On the other hand, strong leaders can retain their top people or pick up your top people by making sure they do not do them!

1. Keep them in the dark.

That’s right. Don’t have a vision for where you are taking your organization or if you have a vision, make sure you don’t tell them what it is and how you intend to get there. When they come to you with their resignation and they tell you that they are going to work for a competitor that is about to grow because they are investing in new methods and marketing to specific verticals, don’t bother telling them that you had that on the agenda from the last “Off-site Central Management Meeting” which was held 2 months ago. They won’t believe you, even if it is true.

Top people think big thoughts and work hard to achieve them. If they can’t see that there is a ‘big picture’ and a strong future, they will look to work where there is one.

2. Don’t listen

I recently met with an ex-associate who is a high achieving sales person in the

pharmaceutical industry. She is on the market for a new role because she wants to take on a difficult market segment with challenging accounts but her manager will not listen to her despite the fact that the individual has a great track record of success with multi-million dollar sales to companies that were 'never going to buy' from her company.

Top people are tuned in to their roles and seek to improve/grow. Sure, you may not be able to implement every idea they have, but not listening is a quick way to have them listen to the next head-hunter that will surely call. Another way to achieve the same end is to "keep the door closed", whether physical or by body language, so that it is obvious that you don't want to listen.

3. Retain the under-performers

In days past, carts were pulled by horses. If there were two horses in parallel and one horse didn't "pull its weight", the cart would go around in circles. If the horses were placed one after the other, the hard working horse would become lame or die of fatigue. Either way, the cart was not going to get there.

Top people are not as dumb as horses. They won't "go around in circles" for long and they certainly won't tolerate over work because the others don't "pull their weight". If you want to keep your top people, make sure they are surrounded by other top people or at least those who "pull their weight".

4. Reward bad behaviour

No doubt you have seen this scenario: There is a person who is seen by management as "brilliant" at a particular skill or has outstanding knowledge/experience because they have been with the company for years. They actively refuse to observe the values and culture of the organisation but they are rewarded by being "left alone" because they are "so important". Others who are not as good at self promotion but who are the 'quiet achievers' that form the backbone of the team exhibit the same behaviour on one occasion and get chastised. This creates the impression that bad behaviour is rewarded and good behaviour is not

valued or overlooked. Even if it is not the top people that are chastised, they will not stay long to watch this injustice continue.

5. Demonstrate questionable ethics

Top performers invariably pride themselves on their reputation which is hard won and easily damaged. Where an organisation condones or tolerates questionable ethics on the part of staff or as an organisation, the good people will begin to look elsewhere for a role with a company that displays ethics that are in line with their standards and where they will not be in jeopardy of “guilt by association”.

Being an ethical organisation goes so much further than ‘playing by the rules’. We can all think of organisations that set the “high moral ground” as well as those that “plumb the depths”. Talk to any high performer and ask them which of these they would prefer to work for. My experience is that to a person they prefer those where the organisation, and most importantly the leaders, are of the highest standard.

6. Be disorganised

Top people are focused on doing what they do best. They require an environment where they can get on with their contribution to the ‘big picture’ without trying to sort through clutter or being uncertain about who to talk to or what process to follow. Large amounts of time and energy are wasted in dealing with organisational clutter and top people will not tolerate that for long.

7. Over-manage

The inverse of disorganisation, over-management will soon have the top person heading for the nearest ‘head hunter’. Top performers need space to enable them to innovate, explore and create. Naturally there must be boundaries, however, keeping them hemmed in with rules, regulations, work procedures, reporting, meetings and tight supervision will leave them feeling constrained and ultimately frustrated. The manager that keeps an open dialogue with the top performer so that they feel supported but not inhibited is the one that keeps them motivated. The one that only focuses on the numbers/activities and insists on only discussing those will see their

top performers do one of two things: become mediocre performers that only just hit the numbers/activity targets or become top performers in another company.

8. Be tardy

A lack of time management is a quick way to see the best people 'walk'. This is so prevalent and yet so easy to resolve. The manager that will lose their best people is the one that makes times with them to meet or see customers only to disappoint them by being late, not arriving or continually re-scheduling the meeting "because something more pressing came up". This tardiness often manifests itself across the organisation with such things as lengthy delays in holding performance reviews, providing new annual employment contracts well after the start of the year, cancelled management updates, meetings that are not run to start or finish on time and a host of other events that are not managed from a time perspective.

The top performer sees tardiness as a lack of respect for them and their time, which they see as highly valuable. If you are not showing them that you can manage your time, they will soon find an environment where time is seen to be as valuable to the organisation as it is to them.

9. Don't do what you commit to

Top performers under-commit and over-achieve. They know that to delight another person or organisation, they need to ensure that they set the appropriate expectations and then over-deliver on those expectations. They expect nothing less from their organisation and especially from their manager.

Out of politeness, many exit interviews do not convey the reality that the top performer is leaving because they feel that the role they joined up for did not live up to the expectation that was set or that they had continually been let down by a manager that had set expectations which they see as "carrots for the donkey" which they believe were never going to be delivered.

10. Set unobtainable goals

Top people take objectives and targets seriously. Often they have set targets for

themselves that exceed those allocated to them by their manager. They will work toward targets and goals they see are achievable. Where the goal is seen as unobtainable, they will still work toward it but will eventually become discouraged when it can't be met, along the lines of the "carrot and the donkey" in the last point.

The best people are keen to over-achieve but they also know when the goal is unrealistic and unachievable. They are the last to give in but they are also the first to go when they know that they have been set an unobtainable goal especially when they see it as an attempt to take advantage of their drive to succeed.

11. Fail to celebrate success

Yes, you read the heading correctly. It says "10", but this one is your bonus for reading this far. Top people are winners. They work hard and take great pleasure in over-achieving, whatever it is they do. They don't necessarily look for accolades, but they do take delight in celebrating success, whether it is theirs, their teams' or their companies. The celebration can be as little as a "well done" from the manager or as big as a "Formal Awards Night". If you create many small celebrations and ensure the top people know they are recognised as winners, they are not likely to leave. Let them think that their efforts are not recognised and fail to celebrate the wins then you stand a very good chance of losing them to a culture that creates, rewards and celebrates winning.

There is no guarantee that addressing any or all of these points will stop your top people leaving. From time to time, top people "need a change" and decide to leave. This is part of the evolution of an organisation and provides a healthy environment where others can rise to fill the void or "new blood" can be added to the team.

One thing I am confident of is that if you let enough of these points exist you will substantially increase the loss of your "top people".



About the Author

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Philip has over 30 years experience in management and leadership of high technology companies and management consulting. He has held leadership, board and senior management positions with high profile IT&T companies where he has specialized in strategy definition; turn around, re-engineering, change leadership and execution to achieve excellent results. His positions have included founding managing director of LSE Consulting (a management consulting company focused on leadership, strategy and execution), Managing Director, CEO, Board member, Director and General Manager with companies such as Cisco Systems, StorageTek, Datacraft Australia, Datacraft Ltd, Radware, PM-Partners group, and Acumen International. He has experience in Australia, New Zealand, Asia, South East Asia and the Pacific.

Philip has a Masters Degree in Business Administration (MBA), Certificate in Electronics, various industry qualifications and is a Fellow Australian Institute of Company Directors (FAICD), Fellow Australian Institute of Management (FAIM) and is a Member of the Institute of Management Consultants (MIMC).

Philip is currently joint Vice Chair of the Board of the Box Hill Institute of TAFE (since 2001), Director of Box Hill Enterprises Pty Ltd (a subsidiary of Box Hill TAFE) and is currently a member of the Box Hill Institute of TAFE Board Executive Committee and the Audit and Risk Committee.