

## Is HR prepared to keep the keepers?

*Without meaningful work and a clear career path, high performers will become disengaged and flock for the exits with devastating results*

BY EILEEN CHADNICK

Recruiting top employees is a challenge, but what happens after organizations land coveted recruits? How do they keep the keepers?

Employee engagement, particularly for high performers, is increasingly becoming top of mind for senior management of leading organizations competing for talent in an ever-changing and complex economy. Talent management is no longer strictly an HR concern. It's a business issue gaining interest in the boardroom.

"We've seen a real transformation over the past few years," said Max Caldwell, a New York-based principal and leader of Towers Perrin's HR services business workforce effectiveness practice. "As businesses transform to drive top-line growth, we're seeing talent emerge as a top strategic priority for CEOs and boards, as well as HR executives."

While employee engagement at all levels is important, a recent Towers Perrin survey of senior-level HR executives at 250 organizations across Canada and the United States indicated the term "talent" is shifting in definition. It now increasingly refers to a smaller, critical subset of employees — senior leaders, mid- and entry-level employees with leadership potential, key contributors or leading technical experts. Management sees this group as key to ensuring future success and a source for the next generation of leadership.

While they comprise only about 15 per cent of an organization's workforce, there is a growing recognition that when it comes to engaging this group, distinct practices and processes are needed.

Is HR ready and able to deliver on the new talent agenda? According to the survey, only about half of

HR executive respondents felt confident they could do the job. Acknowledging there are a lot of initiatives out there, Caldwell said "there is a lot of room for HR to raise its game."

But like any other emerging discipline, there will always be leaders and best practices to learn from. Here are just a few to consider.

**Build programs on the premise that talent is not for sale. It's for rent.** High performers and potential high performers lend their skills, time and talent in return for a meaningful career experience. They'll stay only as long as that career proposition makes sense for them. And while salary and other reward incentives are important, they are not sufficient to build long-term loyalty and engagement.

To keep the keepers there has to be more to the mix, particularly those elements that tap into emotional value. Corporate values, behaviours and actions must align with their personal values and aspirations.

"You have to create meaning for your people and answer, 'What's in it for me?'" said David Barnes, vice-president of communications, advertising and sponsorship at American Express in Toronto.

Barnes said when it comes to employee engagement, leaders have to be authentic with their people and take a personalized approach.

"The best thing you can do is take an interest in them," he said.

Showing genuine commitment in supporting the individual's ongoing growth and development is important. Leaders want to shine, stretch and grow. If a high performer doesn't see a meaningful career path ahead or genuine interest from the employer, she'll likely take her talent elsewhere.

Corporate values must be backed up with meaningful behav-

iours, policies and programs. Discrepancies lead to a break in trust, engagement and, ultimately, loyalty.

Pigeon-holing top talent into existing capabilities can be a mistake — perhaps there is a short-term pay-off but there are long-term repercussions. A formalized and committed development plan for top talent must be a priority if they are to be part of the company's future.

While there are many ways to do this, one-on-one executive coaching is increasingly becoming a coveted perk for emerging leaders and top talent, according to Caldwell.

"I think we're going to see an explosion of demand for coaches...as more people request that as part of their development plans and total reward programs," he said.

Having an outside partner can often feel safer for an employee to fully engage in any leadership issues and career development exploration rather than dealing exclusively with internal professionals who may have their own agenda bias.

**Enrol and develop front-line management in the talent agenda.** HR may champion and support many of the formal structures, strategies and processes but ultimately leaders must lead. Line management carries significant responsibility when it comes to inspiring engagement in direct reports and nurturing the next generation of leaders.

In his book, *Getting Engaged: the New Workplace Loyalty*, consultant Tim Rutledge says the most important determinant of employee engagement is the employee's relationship with his manager. No matter how wonderful the corporate policies and culture are, it's ultimately the manager who will make or break an employee's experience. But not all managers inherent-

ly have the skills to deliver on the talent agenda, which involves identifying and developing talent as well as mentoring and providing career guidance.

Training and coaching programs are becoming increasingly important for organizations committed to an effective talent agenda. American Express recently rolled out two such programs in which all management must participate. Called "Inspiring Employee Engagement" and "Situational Leadership," these programs are part of a broad repertoire of initiatives that support the company's engagement agenda.

Last year the Adler School of Coaching in Toronto expanded a program that teaches coaching skills to managers, an indication of the growing interest in developing these competencies at various leadership levels.

**One-off, ad-hoc initiatives won't work.** Creating a culture that inspires engagement calls for both formal and informal practices. The most essential ingredients are commitment and consistency, and they must be pervasive across the organization's culture, beginning with the most senior-level leadership.

Some of the larger companies are demonstrating their commitment by creating new C-level roles exclusively devoted to talent management strategy.

And while not all companies can do that, what's most important is to take this area seriously. Engaging and retaining top talent is and will continue to be a serious business issue going forward.

"If HR doesn't step up to the plate, they won't be relevant to their senior management," said Caldwell.

And without relevancy, HR executives run the risk themselves of being viewed marginally and outside that highly valued talent pool.

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