

Features

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Retention Means Less Hiring

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Small businesses are often advised to step up their compensation plans to avoid The Great Resignation of job shifters. Starbucks, Trader Joe's and REI are paying more than they once did to provide better insurance, retirement and benefits than most smaller businesses. Fortune magazine named each of these to their list of Best Companies To Work For. However, during The Great Resignation employees allegedly don't ask management for a raise. They simply quit or ghosted their jobs.

Each of the three companies above has recently lost union elections. How did companies that pay better create an environment that caused their employees to fight management and unionize? Two words: "communication" and "respect." The union drives revolved around employees who didn't feel their concerns were being addressed by their leadership.

Picture: Winston, a 2-year-old Standard Bernadoodle, is a comfort to and favorite of both staff and customers at Wallace's Garden Center in Bettendorf, Iowa. Here, employee Paige Peterson takes a break in the nursery with Winston.

While management may have had goals similar to the workforce, they did a poor job of communicating them. They failed to show respect for the complaining workers. Usually the pay and benefits were better than at competing jobs, so the employees wanted those to remain status quo, while seeing changes in management attitudes and working conditions. Time will tell if unions can achieve this difference. Most horticultural businesses lack the economic size to face unionization efforts, however, lessons from larger companies can help us retain our best workers. Reducing turnover means reducing recruiting and the need to hire and train new people.

Truly Listening

Most schools provide instruction on public speaking. Few teach listening skills. Owners and managers tend to focus on the "squeaky wheel." Outsiders observe this clearly, but management can't see it happening.

An astute manager will do a quick inventory of conversations they've had with every employee. Are there some stated problems where the boss hasn't yet given feedback to the employee? Are there specific employees who haven't been listened to?

Serious conversations about job issues—like safety, continuing education, job support, compensation and personal

goals—must be held one-on-one. After these conversations happen, are they followed up with action or, at least, a pre-determined time to revisit them? Just because the employee hasn't raised the issue recently doesn't mean they forgot about it or they don't still need it. You show respect and concern when you refer back to it, ensuring your employee knows you haven't forgotten the discussion and will continue to pursue it.

Show the Boss Cares

A Midwest grower/garden center is in an area where heating oil is the winter energy source. Employees can be listed as a "delivery point" under the garden center's oil contract. The oil company fills up employee's home tanks and bills the garden center at the lower, large-user price. The retailer then deducts the oil costs from paychecks. The bulk rate is cheaper than any single residence could realize independently and results in an annual savings of \$800 to \$1,300 per employee. This not only saves the employees after-tax money, it also serves as a link to keep the employee on the job because no other employer has yet adopted this perk. Most important, it shows the employees that the boss is aware of their needs and cares enough to absorb some bookkeeping costs to make this significant savings available to the team.

Continuing Education Benefits

Helping employees gain new skills and technologies helps both employer and employee. Some employers shy away from this because they're afraid it will result in raises. That thinking is short-sighted. A better-educated employee should generate increased productivity, thereby increasing their value to themselves and the company.

There are tax-advantaged plans wherein the employer can provide tuition assistance for team members. Local seminars and events can expand an employee's potential. Attendance at horticultural conventions and events are superb ways to show the employer cares about an employee's advancement. It also helps team members see their place in the larger horticultural world. When sending employees to educational events, agree ahead of time what they're expected to accomplish while there. Require the employee report back what they learned to their department or to the entire company. It's important these trips are seen as real learning events.

Mental Health is a Real Issue

Exhaustion, burnout and depression are different issues, but each can impact the productivity of the affected employee and other team members. These are areas where the impacted person may not see themselves as accurately as their co-workers do.

Kiwi Nurseries (Acheson, Alberta, Canada) has the Caffeinated Kiwi, a coffee shop where Ashleigh Munro, 2022's Young Retailer Award winner, will occasionally say to an employee, "You look like you could use a cuppa coffee. Come on!"

Kate Terrell (Wallace's Garden Center, Bettendorf, Iowa) has "an untrained therapy dog" that's available any time an employee—or customer—needs calming canine company.

A west coast retailer knew an employee whose close friend died. Her attitude and output slipped way below normal. The boss told her to take two weeks off. Even though it was in early May, the boss insisted. The employee was very grateful and returned with a much better outlook. Caution: Check with competent counsel because offering supportive time-off, as mental health can cross a line creating HIPAA (Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act) issues.

Little Things Go a Long Way

An occasional "bonus" in the form of restaurant or gas cards can make employees feel appreciated if it rewards something they've accomplished. If every employee automatically gets one the first of each month, it becomes an entitlement. To be meaningful it should be intermittent and tied to a specific action you want to applaud and

encourage. The employee feels appreciated and the rest of the team joins in the celebration. If the recognition isn't genuinely deserved, it can create resentment within the team.

Help People Quit

If an employee is unhappy or doesn't want to come to work, don't fight it. Help them move on with their dignity intact so they can be unhappy someplace else.

You may have an employee whose long-term goal isn't working in a garden center for the next 50 years. If you help them get to where they want to be, even though that means leaving you, word gets around that you're a good "stepping-stone employer." You might have three to five years with a great employee who wouldn't have worked for you if it weren't for your reputation of helping employees realize their long-term goals and dreams.

The basic compensation and fringe benefit plan must accommodate employees' basic needs. Beyond that, it's the unique things you do for your team that helps keep them contributing and loyal for the long term.

High School Students Are Fantastic Employees

"They don't come with bad habits learned from other employers. We are able to train them in our way. They are very eager to learn. Many of them are not used to candid conversations with bosses," reports Ashleigh Munro, Garden Center Manager from Kiwi Nurseries in Acheson, Alberta, Canada. "This inability to freely communicate with bosses or co-workers creates safety and productivity issues. We daily force them to answer, 'How did you help a customer today?' and 'What couldn't you help them with?' just so they become accustomed to talking with bosses. We need their input, but they are not used to these conversations so we invest time in giving them communication experiences. They realize they will take this skill with them after Kiwi Nurseries.

"We also pride ourselves on being a no-BS company. [Editor's note: In keeping with current day candidness, Ashleigh doesn't mince words. She knows her target employees use those words so that's how she describes her company. As a "family" magazine, *Green Profit* will stick with the initials]. If people aren't happy here we want them to leave and find where they are happy. It's okay if you don't like working in a garden center. You have found one thing in life you don't want to do and that's a learning experience for you. We want people who want to come to work here. It's okay to not like this work and move on. That's better than being miserable here and making those around you miserable," Ashleigh says.

Separating your company from unhappy or "toxic employees" goes a long way toward keeping your best employees on the team. Great people don't want to hang around people who aren't glad to be working alongside them. **GP**

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