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Further than Figures

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How to bring out the best in long-term employees.

FROM: JAN-FEB 2007 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

Let me tell you about Martha, an employee I once supervised. She had been with the organization a long time and I was the new supervisor of her department. In one of our first interactions, I suggested an alternate approach to one of our accounting processes. Martha immediately jumped in with: “Tried that bright idea five years ago. Didn’t work then, won’t work now.”

If you’ve been managing people for any length of time, you’ve no doubt come across one or two of the many Marthas in the workplace. Loosely defined, they are employees who have a great deal of experience, and who have been with an organization for some time. They’ve seen supervisors and managers come and go; many times they’ve trained those very people only to see them move on to greener pastures. Many Marthas carry chips on their shoulders, perhaps because their experience has been underutilized and under-appreciated.

The reality is that experienced employees are a resource you can and should be tapping into. Here are five ways to capitalize on the value your experienced employees bring to your organization.

Acknowledge Experience

Start by recognizing the value of experience. The truth is that experience is education, and if you, as a leader, cannot appreciate the value of experience, then you’re setting yourself up for ongoing failure with your more experienced employees. But it isn’t good enough to just know this. Verbalize this sentiment: tell them you recognize and value the experience they bring, and that you’d like the benefit of their knowledge as you continue. Don’t be afraid to repeat it. Communication research suggests that people need to hear new information seven times before they internalize it as true.

Seek a Non-compete Agreement

Just as important as communicating that you value their experience is letting these employees know you have no desire to compete with them. If you’re fairly new to the department or organization, it’s unlikely you’ll have the same in-depth knowledge they do, so what’s the point of pretending you do? As a hands-on leader for more than 14 years, I’ve had a great deal of success with the direct approach: “I acknowledge and value the breadth and depth of experience you bring to our department, and I’d like to collaborate, not compete, with you. Can I count on you for that?” I didn’t always get the answer I wanted, but at least I engaged in a dialogue.

Use Them as Sounding Boards

The next logical step is to use long-term employees as a sounding board for new ideas. If they know why your suggested process didn't work five years ago, don't you want to know that? Float ideas past them before making your final decision. "I'm thinking about changing the way we get our employees to submit their expense statements. What do you think?" Now be prepared: just because you start asking these types of questions doesn't mean these employees are suddenly going to turn into fountains of information. They may have seen other managers try this approach and then give up, so you might have to persist until they believe you're the real thing.

Ask Them to Teach or Mentor

An additional strategy that will bring your experienced employees on side and acknowledge the value of their experience is to ask them to teach or mentor others. But if you're going to ask them to do this, make sure you reward them accordingly. Rewards don't have to be fancy or expensive — a verbal or written thank you, recognition in front of their peers, an appreciation lunch — will probably take you miles beyond what others have done to recognize them in the past. Also keep in mind that not everyone is a natural teacher, so you may need to show your employees how to teach others.

Expect Them to Learn

Finally, expect your experienced employees to continue learning. Many times, because they have been doing what they do for awhile, long-term employees assume they no longer need training. Perhaps true when it comes to the technical skills required in their present roles, but what about training in other areas? When it comes to verbal and written communication, relationship skills, leadership development, and personal development, there is always something new to learn. Or perhaps your employees aspire to other roles but previous managers have shut down their dreams. When you insist that your employees continue to learn, the message you send is strong: "I value you enough to invest in you." Sometimes they will fight you on this, stating: "I'm not looking to get a promotion or move to another job, so I really don't need to attend any training." Don't buy into that excuse; be adamant in your resolve that they should always continue to learn.

Bring Out their Brilliance

Employees with experience bring true value as significant resources of knowledge and strength, even though it may take a master jeweller to see that potential. It's your job to find the best way to uncover their value and to let them shine. Try these five strategies to become a master jeweller. And, as always, let me know how you do.

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Merge Gupta-Sunderji, MBA, CGA, helps turn managers into leaders through her training consultancy. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403 605-4756.

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