



## Engage Your Employees and Succession Planning May Take Care of Itself

Local government leaders are busier than ever and have fewer employees to handle the increasing workload. Cities and counties are not immune to The Great Resignation and are pouring considerable effort into attracting employees to positions in their organizations. Before the pandemic (hard to remember those days sometimes!) there was a lot of discussion around the Silver Tsunami – public sector retirements were outpacing private sector retirements by more than 10% and specialty areas like public works, utilities and finance were particularly hard hit. Succession planning is often cited as a way to both address these vacancies and the need for knowledge transfer. Succession planning can be challenging in smaller organizations where there is not depth in management/supervisory positions. Elected officials may be reluctant to spend dollars on hiring consultants who bring expertise to a succession planning process. Here are some steps managers can take to further succession planning efforts, retain promising talent and just maybe fill some key positions:

- 1. Know Your Employees' Career Goals** – Regular conversations with each employee at every level of the organization regarding their career goals can lead to some pleasant surprises. An employee in an entry level public works position may really want to be a firefighter or police officer; or by obtaining some key certifications, be able to move into a better paying position in a wastewater, water or sewer utility. You must ask the question: “Are there positions in our organization or local government in general that are appealing to you, regardless of whether or not you are currently qualified?” Annual performance evaluations are the perfect place for this conversation to occur.
- 2. Identify Employees' Talents** – An Account Clerk who never had the opportunity to go to college may have an aptitude for numbers that can be developed. A supervisor or colleague who encourages that employee to consider a community college course or professional development webinar AND helps them identify funding to pay for it can reap huge benefits. Employees sometimes just need someone to believe they can do it to give them the confidence to try it. Most organizations never deplete their tuition reimbursement accounts – the money is likely in the budget. Webinars are available and far less expensive than offsite training.
- 3. Support Professional Development Efforts** -- Consider forming study groups to assist employees in preparing for certification processes such as water and water sewer

certifications. Pay employees to stay after work and participate in a study group to take a particular test. Paying some overtime shows your employees you care about their future and it is a lot cheaper than a hiring process. Consider a flexible schedule if needed for a staff member taking a class at the local community college, whether in person or on-line. The example you set for flexibility and assistance may cause other employees to consider their career path.

4. **Become an Employer of Choice** – By engaging with your employees and genuinely listening to their career goals, you are becoming an “Employer of Choice”. This will help your organization’s reputation as you try to attract talent. Employees will recommend your organization to their friends as a great place to work, because you have shown that you care not only about doing the job, but also about the person doing the job. In addition, employees may want to develop the skills they need to advance in your organization.
5. **Practice Extreme Collaboration** – This is key to retaining employees. All employees want to be heard and they are truly inspired when one of their ideas is put into practice. A Gallup poll recently found this: ***It takes more than a 20% pay raise to lure most employees away from a manager who engages them, and next to nothing to poach most disengaged workers.*** I recently asked a group of employees from all levels of their organization what makes them feel a sense of belonging in their job. Here is what they told me:

- ***When my opinion counts***
- ***When co-workers come to me for information and my opinion matters***
- ***When we work together toward a common goal***
- ***When I am included in discussions***
- ***We meet often and sometimes outside of work***
- ***When managers hear or listen to your opinions***
- ***Positive comments about our work***
- ***When we have regular meetings where everyone can speak up about anything***
- ***Being included and invited out to lunch***
- ***People stopping to say hello/good-bye***

I also asked why they may not feel a sense of belonging and here is what some of them told me:

- ***Sometimes I don't feel like I belong because I sit in a different location***
- ***When I first started, I did not really know what I was doing***
- ***Not having meetings when we need them***

- *When I am not invited to events*
- *Not being in the loop on certain projects*
- *When I am treated disrespectfully*
- *Decisions related to my job are made without my input*

Not all decisions can be open for discussion, but many can. Employees can be involved in developing equipment specifications, actively participating in process improvement efforts and assisting with research on new technology or new methods for providing current services. Providing employees with clear, honest information on why you cannot take a certain action they favor is also important.

6. **The Value of Onboarding** – It is critical to put your best foot forward with a new employee, ensuring their first few days have the appropriate training set up, they have lunches planned and are introduced to co-workers. It is hard to undo a poor onboarding process. Identifying a mentor in their department (not their supervisor) can help ease their transition. Supervisors should have regular check-ins. Ideally, they will also meet with the City or County Manager/Administrator who can share a few words with them. Their family and friends are going to ask them “how the new job is going” – you want them to be effusive about what you’ve done to establish their sense of belonging.
7. **Conduct Exit Interviews** – Exit interviews are a crucial key to understanding what is going on in your organization. In smaller organizations, these should be done by the Manager or Assistant Manager. The information you glean from this process is invaluable to ensuring your path to becoming an “Employer of Choice.”
8. **Consider an Employee Engagement/Employee Climate Survey** – To understand how your current employees view their workplace and the obstacles they see to advancement can be very instructive. If you take this step, involve employees in the process from beginning to end. Consider an employee committee to work with the consultant to design the instrument. This will give the process credibility with the rest of your organization. Ensure confidentiality for the respondents and practice transparency with the results. Use employee groups to review the results wherever possible and design potential solutions to issues that are raised. The worst thing an employer can do is conduct a study and then shelve the results.

All these efforts require time, commitment, and encouragement from the very top of the organization. City/County Administrators and Managers must push these efforts down through the organization, ensuring that performance evaluations are conducted, employee professional goals and objectives are discussed and if possible, acted upon. These efforts can and should be a part of each department head’s goals and objectives. If local governments are going to

compete effectively for talent, they must be an Employer of Choice – the kind of place their employees talk about as a “great place to work.” Listening to your employees does not cost you anything but your time and can anchor them to your organization in ways that benefit both your organization and the employee. That’s a win-win we can all live with!

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