

Creating a Culture People Want to Work in: How to Recruit and Retain Top Talent

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You regularly spend time on how best to market your products and services to customers and internal clients. Likewise, you probably spend time on customizing your products and services to best meet your customers' needs. What about your organization's culture? How do you differentiate your culture in order to recruit the top talent that makes up your most important resource - your people? No matter what type of organization you are in, putting time into recruiting and developing top talent must be a strong leadership message from managers and executives.

In this article, I address the reasons people join organizations and effective ways to develop and keep employees, including an approach called In-The-Moment (ITM™) Coaching. These ideas stem from: 1) leadership consulting in Silicon Valley and San Francisco, particularly from my experience at Cisco Systems-the industry leader in global internetworking; and 2) teaching and research in association with USF's College of Professional Studies and San Jose State's School of Business.

Theme 1: Why do people stay?

I have found that the key differentiator in why a person stays with his/her organization is a positive relationship and satisfaction with his/her boss. Creative and meaningful work as well as a top-notch comp package can be great. However, if your employees do not feel recognized, if politics and unnecessary complexity get in the way of doing good work, or if managers do not support on-going development and learning, your employees morale will be low. These folks may become passive job-seekers, and, eventually, active job-seekers.

As the boss of your organization or workgroup, your practices are vital to the success of your organization. And your actions are highly scrutinized.

As a leader, you set the tone for your culture with your messages and actions. It is also your job to take the pulse of the culture: to listen, observe, and to notice what makes your organizational culture different. For example, what is it about the informal communication in the hallways or on-line that sets you apart from other small and large businesses/organizations? What kinds of events make your culture different?

Below are some successful leadership practices that set the tone and take the pulse of your organization's culture. You may agree, in theory, with everything here. Doing these consistently may require a shift in behavior, language and thought!

I. Set a direction for your organization and/or workgroup

Be visionary. Be clear. Give people lots of room to apply that direction to their everyday work. Knowledge workers who have a clear direction waste less time in their work. In my fifteen years of coaching and consulting, the number one reason businesses or workgroups do not thrive is that leaders are not clear in their vision and/or direction. Or they are too steadfast and authoritative and do not allow others into their thinking and shaping. Also, be sure that the direction/vision is in all marketing materials.

2. Establish a culture that is based on performance and learning from the get-go

All organizations should have a performance review system that meets legal and compensation requirements. Realize that there is much more to it than that: Integrate performance with professional development. Be sure that feedback comes regularly, not just at "review time." At least once every six months sit down and do a development plan/check-in with your direct reports. Use this time as a gauge: Ask your employees about their job satisfaction.

3. Be a team leader more than a heroic leader

Do not try to save the day as the heroic "do-everything" intrapreneur or entrepreneur. Hire people who are smarter than you, who supplement and complement what you already bring to your organization. This frees you up to be a coach-to regularly listen and give feedback to those you work with and to facilitate team meetings to shape the future of your industry. If people are leaving your organization, find out why. Go to that person so you can hear his/her interpretations directly rather than through others' translations.

4. Be an In-The-Moment (ITM™) Coach

Coaching in fast-paced environments requires even more than the practices above. Being effective means coaching In-The-Moment. Put attention on the effect of your language and the language of those you work with. In your next 1-1 or team meeting, notice if language is limiting effective action in your organization. For example, do people focus on "problems" and absolutes ("the problem with that is," "that will never work here," "the customers always tell us that")? Increasing awareness of language is a significant step in personal development and, in turn, informs successful organizational change.

Theme 2: Why do people sign on?

Michael McNeal, Cisco's Director of Corporate Employment says, "It's easy to be a great coach if you have great players." It is imperative to spend quality time to hire the people who will take your organization to the next level.

People join organizations because of meaningful work, opportunity for creativity, the person they will work for, people they will work with, quality/balance of life-work, the lack of commute AND compensation/stock/money.

As you know, the job market is saturated with meaningful and creative work. Top talent is difficult to attract. So how do you find the people you need? Some do this solely through networking: you meet people you like, they fit your current need, and you hire them. Some have elaborate, recruiting tracking systems and advertise in traditional places (newspapers, radio). Most likely, some of what you are doing now works well. The result: you get good people who are staying put....some of the time.

Below are practices that may fill the gaps. Use these practices to differentiate how prospective employees perceive your organization. Many of these practices are cost-free and require no outlay of typical advertising dollars. Time is required, though, and the more organized you and your staff are, the better. Putting a recruiting plan in place will serve you now and when the market changes.

Michael McNeal and I discussed the essentials of talent searching and created a five-point plan. Cisco is known for its innovative recruiting methods and has been featured in Fast Company, Fortune and on CNN. Check out www.cisco.com/friends/ for a real treat!

Here is a five-point plan:

I. Map recruiting directly to business plans and to the critical competencies needed in your organization

Your strategic and marketing planning, you have developed clear service offerings. Weave these messages throughout internal and external literature and the website prospective employees will view. Be sure your organization's values, mission, and offerings are clear in the interview process.



2. **Do not wait for people to come to you and do not make prospective employees wait**
Active job-seeking is a graceless process: People wait to hear from you and to find out what is "wrong" with their candidacy. This is not fun. Make it more graceful. Differentiate your business/organization through excellent follow-up and a quality, organized interview process. Make sure that the prospective candidate interviews with a number of people they will work with.
3. **Get to the passive job-seeker**
Although these job-seekers are not actively looking for another job, they are not entirely happy with their current situation. Think outside the box! Passive job-seekers are those who are surfing the net at lunch or people you meet at the microbrewery or wine/food festivals. Think about demographics-where do the people you are trying to hire hang out when they are not at work?
4. **Focus on employee referrals**
The best way to get new clients is through existing clients; likewise, the best way to find new employees is through existing employees. Ask your employees: "Who should come to work for our organization?" If you need to systemize this process, do so through email or your intranet AND make sure it is confidential and has a personal touch. Offer referral fees to your employees if you think this will be an appropriate incentive.
5. **Link prospective employees with current employees**
Hook a prospective candidate with a "friend" in your organization. Cisco has developed an extremely successful program called "make a friend@cisco." In the initial corporate-wide invitation, 4000 people signed up to be a "friend" to prospective employees. If you are a part of a small organization, you can differentiate even more because you can offer more personal contact with prospectives.

Finally, if you have a budget dedicated to advertising, put money into the following:

- Make your website interactive for prospective employees. Devote web space to actively exchange information and be sure you have the resources (human and technology) to follow-up with prospectives. Check out www.cisco.com/jobs/ to learn more about Cisco's Profiler, yet another innovative way to interactively communicate with prospective employees.
- Hire a recruiter to focus full-time on hiring quality people. Tie the recruiter's performance to the quality and sustainability of candidates they attract. Do the people they have recruited stay in the organization? How are the employees' three- and six-month reviews? What promotions do these employees get over two years?