

Developing Your Most Precious Resource

When it comes to employee value, it's time to put your money where your mouth is.

I hear this one all the time: Employees are our greatest asset. It's perhaps the most commonly espoused and most poorly acted on statement in the world of business. Without employees, a company doesn't amount to much more than unused machinery and empty sites, yet investment in people generally falls far behind investment in such things as mine development and mill upgrades. Is this true in your company? Well, guess what--your employees know it. A worldwide survey by Towers Perrin tells us that only 6% of Canadian employees feel they are treated like their company's greatest asset. Why should you care? With a serious worker shortage upon us, that measly 6% signals nothing less than a crisis.

The worker shortage means it's easy for employees to change jobs, and company loyalty is becoming a thing of the past. With overall attrition rising 25% in the last five years, chipping away at productivity and profitability, you might say these statistics are the new canary in the coal mine.

Bad news: this isn't a problem we can throw money at. While financial incentives may attract new employee to an organizations, they do little to keep them there. Studies confirm that employees stay at organizations where the leadership (direct managers and senior executives) makes them feel like a valued part of a team. More bad news: the traditional command-and-control style of management found in many resource organizations is more likely to drive employees away than retain them. If your company is still clinging to this old-school leadership style, you may be at serious risk.

What's an organization to do? Make sure your employees feel like the precious resource they are--from the ground up. I say "ground up" because the common leadership development approach of investing exclusively in senior managers in hopes that new skills and attitudes will trickle down to the masses isn't good enough anymore. The process is slow to implement and even slower to show results, which are often too diluted to have significant impact. The worker shortage demands a new approach, one that will drive dramatic change that's both quick and broad-reaching.

Take what happened at Goldcorp. Following the merger of Goldcorp, Placer Dome, and Glamis in 2006, the company was faced with the challenge of developing a new Goldcorp culture in which every employee feels like a valued part of this new team. While they could have defined and distributed a set of core values through the usual internal channels, they recognized that a company's culture is defined by the behaviours of its employees--behaviours modelled every day by front-line supervisors. If Goldcorp could help this group lead in a way that modelled the company's core values and commitment to its employees, then surely the organization would thrive.

With help from The Refinery, Goldcorp launched their Supervisory Leadership Development Program (SLDP). Far from the usual Leadership Development Program, usually only seen at the most senior levels of organizations, the Goldcorp program was

specifically designed to reach out to these front-line supervisors--a serious undertaking spanning eighteen months and several locations. Given that this group learns well by doing, the program incorporates some rather creative experiential activities. A basketball game has been used to teach strategy. An "amazing race" explored the concepts of team development and resource allocation. A real-time leadership challenge joined participants with undergraduates from a local university. Implementation is happening rapidly, with a new cohort launching monthly. Within the next few months all supervisors across Canada will be taking part in the SLDP. By fall, supervisors in Mexico will be embarking on a similar adventure. Ultimately, all Goldcorp supervisors will have the competence and confidence to lead--and retain--their workers.

Even in these early stages we've seen behaviours starting to change, and conversations with Goldcorp managers reveal some significant shifts in the right direction. But there's another, deeper change happening, one that may turn out to be more beneficial than any other result. Program participants tell us time and again how grateful they are that their company has invested in them this way. In other words, they feel valued. So valued, in fact, that since the program began not one supervisor has left the company.

The days are over when a company could pay mere lip service to employee value. Are you doing enough to make your workers feel valued? If not, it's time to put your money where your mouth is.

Dr. Rosie Steeves is the co-principal of The Refinery Leadership Partners Inc., a Vancouver-based consulting company. The Refinery is interested in hearing from readers on leadership issues in the workplace. All information is treated confidentially. E-mail your questions, comments and ideas to rosie@refineryleadership.com. This article was previously published in issue 959 of Business in Vancouver.