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Serve The Straight Stuff

Steve Watkins Thu Jun 12, 6:27 PM ET

Want to keep your best people? Give it to them straight. Sounds simple, but it's not always easy. Here are some ways to do it:

Give feedback. Make it frequent. More than 40% of people don't feel they get any feedback, says Matthew Kelly, president of Chicago-based Floyd Consulting and author of "The Dream Manager." More than 70% say they don't get enough feedback.

"People fail because they don't know how to succeed," he told IBD.

Open it up. "If you don't give good feedback, it hurts the person you're keeping it from and it ultimately hurts the organization," said Beverly Kaye, co-author with Sharon Jordan-Evans of "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em" and CEO of talent management consultant Career Systems International.

Hurdle obstacles. People aren't honest with some feedback because they're afraid to hurt someone's feelings. They'd rather give positive news, plus they're not sure their own view is right, Kaye says. Overcome that by running your thoughts by a colleague before confronting the employee, and by saying it in a constructive way. Don't just criticize; show how to improve.

Know the stakes. The biggest key to work satisfaction is an employee's relationship with the boss, says Sam Culbert, a UCLA professor and author of "Beyond Bullsh*t."

He sees straight talk as the key to building that relationship.

Shoot for honesty. "You've got to clear the way for people to be authentic with others, and first with themselves," Culbert said. If the firm is politically charged, it's harder to build a straight-talking atmosphere.

Make a note. Keep a log to remind you of specific feedback you want to give. Then, in regular feedback sessions, you can point to last week's customer call, rather than giving vague remarks, Kaye says.

Ask for their view. If you struggle to initiate feedback, ask employees what their take is on their performance, Kaye and Jordan-Evans say. Find out where they feel they need to grow.

Avoid disappointment. People feel let down when you give them unrealistic expectations. The more honest you are, the less disappointed your work force will be, Kelly says. "People will step up once they know the situation."

Assume everyone is different. That will lead you to ask questions rather than give directions, letting the other person speak.

"If you deprive another person of their voice, then people get very unhappy," Culbert said.

Cut down on hierarchy. It creates too many levels of communication and hinders straight talk, Culbert says. The more layers, the more the message gets lost.

Know the score. Studies by the Center for Creative Leadership of Greensboro, N.C., show that a lack of feedback hurts leaders. It causes employees to fall short of their potential. Tell the truth and don't sugarcoat it. It'll help them and you.

Realize the downside. People will leave a firm if they don't get coaching. "They'll say, 'Show me how I can get better, or I'm out the door,'" Kaye said.

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