

Recognition, Appreciation, and Fun

The effort to retain staff members should include recognizing and rewarding their efforts and ensuring that the school environment is enjoyable.

BY DIANE HODGES

Worried that the teacher shortage will hit your district? The United States will need 2.2 million new teachers by the 2008–09 school year, at a time when 20% of all new hires leave teaching within three years. In urban areas, 50% leave within five years. When I was a principal and then a human resources director, I started each school year with a bit of trepidation. I was trying to fill vacancies while wondering whether staff members would tell me that they weren't returning to their positions at the last minute, leaving me in a lurch.

Principals share stories with one another about the creative, yet unprofessional, ways in which people have left their jobs (e.g., sending the boss a cake with a resignation letter inside, sending the message via a singing telegram or fax, and writing "I quit" in the snow on the windshield of the boss's car). People quit their jobs when they are unhappy and other jobs are available. As Dale Carnegie said, "People rarely succeed unless they have fun in what they are doing."

Acceptance, recognition of contributions, and encouragement of personal growth help create employee loyalty and retention. Employees rate recognition

and appreciation as two of the most important reasons they stay in their jobs. Without them, employees start polishing their résumés and looking elsewhere. When I was a district administrator, I made a conscious effort to make my district a joyous place to work so the good staff members would stay, the district would be perceived as a great place to work, and the best new teachers would want to work there. With the enthusiastic help of fellow educators from coast to coast, I collected recognition and appreciation ideas that have been effective in school settings. Some of the elements of a recognition and appreciation program are inclusiveness, individualized rewards, visibility, variety, and keeping work fun.

Inclusiveness. Staff members should be part of the development and implementation of the recognition program. Form a committee composed of members from each employee group to develop and implement the program. You will find that including staff members in the process is a method of recognition in itself. Provide structure by helping the group members set their goals, but let them plan the program. The program then becomes theirs, rather than the administration's.

It is likely that there will not be much of a budget allocated for these activities, so the group needs to be able to think of creative rewards.

Individualized rewards. Recognition and rewards must come in a variety of forms. Each person is unique, so rewards cannot be one size fits all. It is important to determine what is meaningful to the recipients and to give them choices.

To give rewards, you must determine what behaviors you are rewarding. For example, would you want to reward excellent attendance? One of the Fulton County Schools in Atlanta, GA, rewards attendance each semester. Those who qualify may select the incentive award of their choice, such as:

- A letter of commendation from the principal for their personnel file
- Two weeks of casual dress
- A 45-minute lunch period for five days
- A reserved parking space of their choice for one semester
- Three days of early work leave
- A \$50 classroom supplies order
- Three days of exemption from bus or lunch duty
- Exemption from two after-school or evening special events.

Visibility. The program should be visible to others—coworkers, students, and community members. The program should be both public and published—be proud out loud! Notify as many people as possible through such com-

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munication methods as memos, notes home to students' families, banners, and the local media. For example, you could make a banner for the school that shows the names of the staff members who have excellent attendance to everyone who enters the building, and you could publish the names in the local newspaper for community members to see.

Variety. Change the program frequently so it's fresh with new ideas and activities. The same thing over and over again becomes routine and starts to lack luster. Keep the creativity alive so it stays interesting and fun.

Keeping work fun. Walt Disney said, "You can dream, create, design, and build the most wonderful place in the world, but it takes people to make the dream a reality." Building a great school is a dream that people will work toward only when they are happy doing so.

When I was a principal, my school had many activities planned for Friday, which is also the start of the weekend and payday, so we focused on a campaign to look forward to Monday morning. Administrators greeted staff members at the door with bagels or M&Ms (Monday Mornings) and wished them a happy Monday. Casual day was moved to Monday. Some people started the week on *Moanday* rather than Monday, so one school implemented a "Positive Monday" rule: No negative comments could be made on Monday, and anyone making such comments was fined. They could no longer complain about the weather, how their sports teams played, housework, or other unpleasant topics. They focused on uplifting conversations instead. But Monday was not the only time for fun. Staff meetings began with volunteers leading the group in Five

Minutes of Fun, when they gave circle massages, had a bubble gum-blowing contest, shared embarrassing moments, conducted a sing-along, and engaged in other fun activities. **PL**

Conclusion

Enjoyment, fun, laughter, recognition, appreciation...these are things people can't get enough of. These are things that contribute to the quality of life. These are things that people can contribute to their workplaces to help enhance their own lives and the lives of those around them, and that help to retain and recruit the best people for schools and districts. Drive your staff happy!

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