How Leaders Can Beat the Labor Crisis

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By now, we're all intimately familiar with the ongoing labor crisis, either because of the constant media coverage or because you or your company is feeling the effects first-hand. No industry is exempt from the shortage — employees and job seekers of all backgrounds have walked away from job opportunities due to burnout, low pay, being overworked and underappreciated, or just wanting a change of career.

But in a high-productivity, high-stress line of work like digital marketing, losing one or more workers can mean missed deadlines and unhappy clients. An agency environment isn't one where just anybody can walk through the door and excel. Once you've managed to cultivate a skilled and effective team, it's in your best interest to keep it intact.

The labor shortage isn't welcome here. So here's how I've avoided it.

Be generous with your staff

My agency has been working virtually for the past 18 months, ever since the pandemic took off in March of 2020. While it hasn't been the ideal working situation and has led to a variety of communication errors that wouldn't have happened in the office, it was the best decision we could have made.

Being generous, allowing your team to work however they work best and kicking the rigid nine-to-five office structure to the curb has been a key factor in employee retainment. If you meet people where they're at, they'll usually meet you too.

Ultimately, I care that work gets done well and done on time. How that happens is my employee's business. If they need help or resources they ask, but for the most part, I rely on them to be self-sufficient because they're all adults. The era of desk holders working (at least a few days a week) from the comfort of their living room is on the horizon. So really, getting your team used to working virtually is more than just a good practice for keeping your workers around; it's helping your company adapt to the future.

However: Being generous and understanding is not the same thing as lowering your standards. Communicate thoroughly and often that you still expect the same quality of work no matter where your staff is located.

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Play to your employee's strengths

Labor shortage or not, this is just sound advice for keeping talented, hard-working and invested employees as part of your team.

People want to focus on tasks they enjoy and feel like they're excelling at. Yes, a little challenge is usually necessary to keep even the best of your staff on their toes and help them avoid getting too complacent in their abilities. But if the job feels like a grind or they don't feel like they're being adequately appreciated for a job well done, your valuable employees are going to start looking for a job that will give them that.

Here's what I recommend: First, always be available to be a

mentor. Your employees will feel cared about and you can train them to complete tasks just the way you want them. Second, take note of what your team members are good at and what they want to learn in the future and assign roles accordingly.

As long as other factors are met (i.e. the work environment isn't toxic and they're being paid fairly) they'll stick around.

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Always be hiring

One easy way to avoid losing talent is to always have potential new talent bookmarked.

Always have job postings up on LinkedIn, Indeed and ZipRecruiter. Always take the time to look at the applications and portfolios you're being sent, even if you're not looking to hire the applicant right away. The purpose of this is not to assume that your employees are going to quit soon or to say "go ahead and walk, there are a million people who want this job!" No – the point here is that, due to whatever circumstances arise, sooner or later a spot at your company will open up.

There's also the potential that the need for an entirely new role could become necessary, and that one of the nets you've been casting with your job postings could haul in just the right person. For example, I used to think that having an administrative assistant was the same thing as having a secretary – not needed, as I could disperse those tasks to existing team members who had the bandwidth to deal with them.

I was entirely incorrect. Bringing on a new employee to research potential projects and head up important tasks that

were being neglected has taken an immense burden off the company. Fighting the labor shortage isn't just about keeping your employees or finding new ones – a more important and long-lasting solution is pinpointing the reason why employees leave in the first place and eliminating those problems.

The reason so many businesses are hurting for labor is because they treat their workers like garbage and offer unattractive wages and benefits. It's harsh, but true. At some point, turnover ends and there will be nobody next in line for the role you're trying to fill.

When you treat your workers like they're expendable and don't make your company seem attractive, you siphon off good employees and limit the pool of people you could replace them with. So, if you're hurting for talent, ask yourself if perhaps the reason lies with you.

Related: Labor Shortage? Depends on Who You Ask.

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