

A *White Paper*

“People don’t leave companies; they leave bosses.”

“My Boss Is a Jerk”

Sometimes people leave their place of employment, having found other work. They may announce their departure with a simple letter of resignation, thinking that they are avoiding an uncomfortable conversation they imagine will occur with their boss.

Sometimes they have that face-to-face with the boss. They tell the boss their reasons for leaving and offer thanks for all the good things at your shop. Indeed, thanks for everything, boss. See you around.

Perhaps you’re that boss and you’re left with questions. Certainly, you have to figure out how to cover the duties of the departing employee. More important, though, is becoming clear about why you just lost a valuable team member and watched all the skills you paid to hone and all that institutional knowledge walk out your door. And, if you only received an impersonal resignation letter and there was no discussion, you’re being sent a message that confrontation with you is simply unacceptable, that your former employee won’t engage with you and perhaps that’s true for many others as well. That’s a huge problem and it is a topic for another white paper. Let’s look first at why you lost all those skills and that encyclopedia of institutional knowledge.

The vast majority of departing employees will tell you that they are leaving for a better opportunity and/or more money. While those things certainly may be true, most often they are not the primary reason employees leave. Study after study by independent third party researchers have found something far less tangible yet far more powerful as the major reason your best people leave.

Those studies have found that roughly 68% of employees leave because of a perceived conflict with an immediate supervisor. That feeling on the part of the departing employee is often expressed as, “My boss is a jerk.” That is something that your non-confrontational former employee wants to, but is afraid to say, either to avoid a fight or to preserve a favorable reference. Yet that is the most important piece of information for you.

It’s often said that people don’t leave companies; they leave bosses.ⁱⁱⁱ Dr. Wayne Hochwarter at The Florida State University sought to learn if that was fact or just urban legend, so he did a study in 2006ⁱⁱⁱ of 700 people and found some interesting things:

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- 39% of workers said their supervisor failed to keep promises.
- 37% indicated their supervisor failed to give credit when due.
- 31% said their supervisor gave them the “silent treatment” during the past year.
- 27% reported their supervisor made negative comments about them to other employees or managers.
- 24% indicated their boss invaded their privacy.
- 23% said their supervisor blamed others to cover up personal mistakes or minimize embarrassment.

There were reports of other forms of abuse from bosses, too, but all of the descriptions fall under the category of creative ways to destroy trust and relationship – i.e. the boss is a jerk.

Your company vision statement may be compelling and the work you’re doing in the world may be noble, but those things aren’t enough to influence your people to give their very best, to be fully engaged employees, much less to stay with your shop. At the conclusion of Hochwarter’s study he did, indeed, determine that employees leave bosses, not companies. That is because the primary driver of engagement is the leader-follower relationship.

There are many things that are important to employees and that influence them to be fully engaged, to want to give their A-Game and to stay working at your shop. In general, it varies by generation, although the differences are more according to emphasis, rather than on the issues themselves. Here’s a short list for great leadership from Leigh Branham’s seminal work, [The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave.](#)^{iv}

- Communicate thoroughly during the interview process about the job and the workplace so that your candidate is clear about the realities s/he will find.
- Match the person and the job.
- Provide coaching and feedback. Note: the yearly performance review is probably destructive and is always too late. This is about a continuing conversation.
- Provide growth and advancement opportunities.

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- Provide recognition when and where it is due. Make sure your people feel valued and do it promptly.
- Provide ways to balance work and non-work life. Believe it or not, your people have lives outside of your shop. Your 20-somethings are acutely sensitive to this issue – they don't live to work, so it's critical that you make allowances for their interests beyond your door.
- Your people want you to be trustworthy in every way and in all that you do. Whenever you do something that undermines trust (like the list above from Hochwarter) trouble is sure to follow.

Much has been written about employee retention and about employee engagement and each study has its own list of what is important. For example, money and benefits matter to all employees. However, once people feel fairly compensated and assuming they aren't in financial distress due to a crisis, throwing more money at employees rarely produces the lasting performance improvements that are desired. What is far more powerful is the relationship between the leader and the follower.

All relationships are based on the answer to this question: "Do you care about me?" Look at the two lists in this white paper and you'll see that nearly everything comes down to whether the leader cares enough about those looking to him/her for leadership to create the work environment and relationship that are satisfying and motivating to employees.

If you want to find out about what is satisfying to your people, try asking and then listening – really listening. Seeking solely to understand. You may be surprised at what you learn.

Do you care enough to do that?

i Buckingham, Marcus and Coffman, Curt, *First Break All The Rules: What the World's Greatest Managers Do Differently*, Simon & Schuster, 1999

ii *ibid*

iii Hochwarter, Harvey, Stoner, et.al, The Florida State University, 2006

iv Branham, Leigh, *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*, American Management Association, 2005