



11 Things You Can Do to Attract, Retain, and Engage Top Talent

Action Steps

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1. **Make sure you are “dialed into the voice of your staff”** by visiting frontline staff as often as possible. Make sure leadership and administrative staff visit sites, talk with staff, ask for feedback, and help as needed. Leaders who pitch in and help are especially respected by staff. One leader interviewed said she has been known to clean up dog poop rather than call housekeeping.
2. **Don’t try to solve people problems with pizza parties.** If morale is low, don’t think “goodies, gimmicks, and gala events” will solve the problem. Engage employees in exploratory conversations to find out root causes and work together to address them.
3. **Teach and coach employees to focus on their Circle of Control and Circle of Influence,** rather than those things that can’t be changed. This is critical if you are going to effectively engage employees in problem-solving, especially around issues related to creating a better work experience that would make them want to stay and attract other great people. Understanding this helps avoid unproductive conversations about things you can’t change or options that aren’t feasible (like doubling their wages).
4. **Make it clear that employee input is vital and that the best solutions are co-created by staff and management.** In the words of Natalee D’Antoni, Executive Director of Riverwoods “Don’t just tell them their opinion is important...show them.” Actively engaging employees in problem-solving, generating improvement ideas, and making changes, also fosters a more empowered, resilient team as opposed to teams marred by drama, bickering, and an Us vs. Them mentality, which is commonly found in organizations that use traditional Command and Control management approaches.

5. **Ask employees why they work at your facility and why they do the work they do.** Use this information to explore with them how to double down on these factors so they're even stronger. Ask them to share with you stories that illustrate these reasons. Curate these and *use them in your recruiting and new hire orientation.*
6. **Ask your employees for input about things previous employers did** that would be great if you employed as well as things other employers did that drove them crazy.
7. **Conduct [Stay Interviews](#), and better yet, [“Help me help you help us” Conversations](#).** Whereas Stay Interviews focus on preventing unwanted turnover, “Help me help you help us” Conversations elicit information that can be used to tailor your managerial style to each particular employee, identify each employee’s Engagement Recipe, remove obstacles to them performing at their best, and gather useful information you can use to improve processes as well as the work experience you deliver.
8. **Increase the odds that staff will give you honest feedback and share candid input that can help you retain and engage them by learning how to create [Psychological Safety](#).** Becoming skilled at this includes the attitudes and beliefs we bring to conversations as well as language patterns that make it more likely that employees will say what needs to be said rather than hold a resentment, become disengaged, and start looking for work elsewhere.
9. **Demonstrate “We see you and care about you as an individual”** by finding out a staff member’s favorite snacks, foods, hobbies and interests, their family, and pets, etc., and use this to celebrate birthdays and show appreciation. (BTW...this is also something Ritz Carlton does to tailor their expressions of appreciation vs. do a “one size fits all”).
10. **Let staff know you notice and appreciate hard work and specific examples of excellence by “Catch people doing things right.”** Feeling seen and appreciated are two of the important human needs that often don’t get met in the workplace.

11. **“Celebrate Awesome” by gathering and sharing stories of employees exemplifying excellence and your cultural norms.** This is one of the things that Ritz Carlton does to strengthen their culture and reinforce their legendary customer service. As *Made to Stick* authors Chip and Dan Heath say, stories provide “inspiration and simulation.” Stories illustrating people performing at a high level or overcoming adversity inspire people to “raise their game” and show them how. I like to add “celebration” to “inspiration” and “simulation” because sharing these stories is a great way to “Celebrate Awesome.” The more you Celebrate Awesome, the more awesome you get.
12. **Remember “What you appreciate, appreciates”.** Practice noticing and expressing gratitude when you see employees doing the things you would like to see more of.
13. **Make sure your facility is as nice as possible, and a place that fosters pride.** “We go the extra mile to make sure our facilities are really nice, so staff feel proud of where they work. We don’t have stains on the floor. If they ask for something that helps a resident...we’re on it. If we can’t, we communicate why and help them get involved in an alternative solution” notes Kelly Wesbrock, DLTC Healthcare.
14. **Involve employees in sharing successes and appreciation.** For instance, DLTC Healthcare has a Facebook page where staff from all facilities share words of gratitude to their colleagues, share things they’ve tried that have worked, and celebrate other successes. This helps create a “we’re all in this together” culture...something hugely important for retaining and engaging staff, and for boosting resilience. It also helps to embed learning into everyday life, which makes work more satisfying. It makes work more interesting and it also helps people experience more “wins” at work, which boosts morale.
15. **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** The more employees are “in the loop,” the greater their emotional connection to their employer. This is one of the most often cited differences in organizations that have a highly engaged workforce compared to those with a disengaged workforce.

16. **When there's an issue with an employee, practice getting curious and "seeking first to understand" vs. responding in an authoritarian, Old School way.** To paraphrase one leader I've interviewed: "The ones who struggle with hiring and retention are the hardcore individuals. They can't bend or be flexible." As another leader said about her own growth as a leader: "If someone shows up late for work or calls out...my first thought is 'what does the policy say?'. I've changed to saying, 'Let's look at the situation and see if we can get creative and be flexible'".
17. **Create learning and development opportunities for all staff.** Riverwoods hired a Learning and Development Director who has created a whole catalog of courses and has found this to be a total game-changer. In the hospitality industry, doing this has also made a huge difference with housekeeping staff...a position with notoriously high turnover. Staff interviewed said that even if they weren't ever promoted to a supervisory position at that hotel, having the opportunity to develop more professional skills made it an extremely desirable employer. Since younger employees place such a high priority on professional development when selecting an employer, this is something to take seriously.
18. **Involve residents in as many ways as possible,** since staff frequently report their relationship with residents is the primary source of job satisfaction. For instance, at Riverwoods, residents are involved in new hire orientation and two-way gratitude/celebration activities with staff. They also have resident-led classes, which both acknowledges the knowledge and wisdom (and respect for) residents, and provides valuable education for staff.
19. **Make some type of gratitude practice a regular part of the day or week.** It might be a One Good Thing practice that one team at Goodwill does where each team member shares something they are grateful for or a win they had that last week. At Riverwoods, they have a practice they call The Good, which happens every Friday. Both staff and residents do shoutouts about things that have gone well and shoutouts of appreciation to others. To make this work, engage your staff in coming up with their version of this concept vs. forcing it on them. Discuss the value of it and perhaps experiment with different versions to see what resonates most with your team.

20. **Talk with leaders in your industry and—even more valuable—outside of your industry about things they do to create a great work experience and become an Employer of Choice.** Often the greatest breakthroughs and game changers come from people from outside an industry. For instance, many of the best ideas for creating a better patient experience came from studying and modeling the hospitality industry.

Note: Special thanks to Natalee D'Antoni, Executive Director at Riverwoods, Kelly Wesbrock, COO of DLTC Healthcare, and Shelly Sirois, Administrator, The Lamp Memory Care Center for sharing their insights and experiences.

Mantras to Remember

“What you appreciate appreciates.”

“Catch people doing things right.”

“Don't be a [Seagull Manager](#).”

“Every better result you desire requires having a better conversation.”

“When we're careless with people, we teach them to care less about us.”

“If your employees are [‘just not that into you’](#) it may be because they don't think you're into them.”

“What is mentionable is manageable” (source: Mr. Rogers)

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About David Lee

David Lee, the founder of [HumanNature@Work](#), works with employers who want to improve employee engagement, productivity, and customer service. He has worked with organizations and presented at conferences both domestically and abroad.

An internationally recognized thought leader in the field of employee engagement and performance, he is the author of over 150 articles and book chapters that have been published in trade journals and books in the US, Europe, India, Australia, and China, as well as the books *Dealing with a Difficult Co-Worker* and *Powerful Storytelling Techniques* (published by ASTD Press).

In addition to his research and work with both struggling and “best in class” organizations, David Lee’s work draws from a wide range of scientific disciplines including cognitive neuroscience, anthropology, psychoneuroimmunology, trauma and resilience research, and paleopsychology.

Taking this research which typically doesn’t find its way into the business world, David translates these principles of human nature into practical leadership and managerial strategies that optimize employee performance.

To capture the impact understanding human nature makes, David borrows from the popular TV show *The Dog Whisperer* and explains “Understanding human nature helps you become a People Whisperer, and by doing so, dramatically improves your ability to get the best results from others (and yourself).”

Recently, his work on what makes organizations resilient, and employees perform at their best, has focused on the central role productive relationships and productive conversations have on these outcomes, with this being the take away message:

“Every better business result you want requires having a better conversation.”