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Keeping Employees

Introduction

Good employees are not always easy to come by. Finding someone who is motivated, dependable and fits in with your operation can be a difficult task, but keeping those workers can be even more of a challenge. Retaining quality employees is important—especially in today’s times of a competitive job market and a shrinking labor pool. Additionally, improving the turnover rate means spending less time and money training new employees. This is especially significant in a small business where spare time and funds are limited.

Objective: Upon completion of this lesson, participants will be able to identify opportunities within their operation where they may make improvements in employee retention.

Why Do Employees Leave?

The first step in retaining employees is determining some of the common reasons employees leave in the first place. Employees leave for a variety of reasons—economics, industry trends, the operation’s culture, etc. Most commonly, however, employees leave due to:

- Poor communication
- Lack of challenging and exciting work
- Lack of personal and professional growth opportunities
- Lack of recognition and rewards
- Lack of proper training
- Lack of control in their jobs
- Feeling their work does not make a difference

It is often believed that compensation is the key reason for employee turnover. And, compensation is often referred to on exit interviews; but research shows other causes are present and that terminating employees are many times reluctant to discuss the other reasons candidly. In competitive labor markets, compensation certainly matters. However, the reasons listed above are key.

Daniels (2003) indicates “the overwhelming majority of people who leave any company leave because of the way they are treated every day.” This is not to say employees are being treated poorly; just that they are not necessarily being treated well, especially when it comes to issues like being outwardly appreciated or acknowledged for a job well done. At the same time, if all employees are given the same positive affirmations, the very best workers are being punished, as they may feel it is unfair to work harder and go the

extra mile, only to get the same praise—or raise—as a worker who does the bare minimum (Daniels, 2003).

Many employers are surprised to discover their employees left due to this type of job dissatisfaction, so it is important to identify methods of improving morale to prevent unnecessary turnover. By following the steps below—and customizing them to best fit your company, swine operation managers can become the type of employer that good workers want to stick with throughout their career.

1. Create a Positive Work Environment

One proven way to keep employees happy—and working for you—is to create a positive, enjoyable workplace. Happy workers are not only pleasant to manage, but they will be more pleasant with customers and other employees and more patient with the pigs and machinery.

A positive work environment can mean a multitude of things; something different for every one. However, a variety of non-monetary perks can lead to higher morale and lower turnover.

In agriculture, it is difficult to give employees time off; after all, hogs still have to be fed, checked on and cleaned up after on the weekends and holidays. However, by carefully scheduling employee vacation time on a rotating basis—and not during peak times—it can be done. Since most workers are concerned with balancing their home and work life, time off can be a big morale booster.

Additionally, assisting with family issues, even in a small way, can make a worker feel like he or she matters. If possible, providing dependable child care—either on-site or subsidized—can go a long way toward boosting morale. If that is not a possibility, providing referrals to high-quality child care facilities in the area can also be a plus for parents. Furthermore, a positive environment can be created by allowing parents time to take care of parental obligations such as taking a sick child to the doctor or missing a couple of hours' work to catch the child's school play.

Another way to create an upbeat environment is to provide a comfortable break room where employees can catch their breath for a moment and have a cup of coffee or a soft drink. Employees can bring in their own items, but employers should also consider stocking the fridge and providing some inexpensive snack options. A weekly or monthly free breakfast or homemade dessert day can turn an ordinary break area into a comfortable environment for employees to converse with their coworkers and get recharged before going back to work.

2. Recognize Efforts

The single most powerful tool in retaining talented employees is personal recognition and sincere appreciation. Workers want to know their employers notice a job well done. Recognition is positive reinforcement and positive reinforcement of actions gets those same actions repeated. There are many ways to show appreciation for a job well done. Some methods include:

- Thank you notes or other special notes
- Employee of the Month program
- Certificates of recognition
- Public praise
- Gift card

Unlike money, which is an external motivator and short-lasting, self-esteem is internal and everlasting. Self-esteem and self-motivation can be increased through recognition, but also through advancement and responsibility so the employee may have a sense of achievement and personal growth. It is important to remember that good deeds that are recognized are more likely to be repeated.

3. Involve Everyone

An employee feels appreciated and valued if he or she is involved in the operation; yet this is one area where many employers fail. Allowing workers to express their ideas and have an impact on decisions that affect their job helps them feel involved in and important to the business. Additionally, workers who believe they have a stake in the business are more likely to go above and beyond; therefore, improving productivity and profits.

One way to involve everyone is to solicit ideas; both general and those specific to an upcoming task or challenge. This can be done through speaking one-on-one with employees, in a group setting, or even through an anonymous suggestion box. Employees should be encouraged to make suggestions and be informed of the preferred method to do so (e.g., by speaking to the boss, sending an e-mail, etc.)

4. Develop Employees

Well-trained employees are more capable and willing to assume more control over their jobs. They need less supervision, which frees management for other tasks. Offering a tuition reimbursement program for university-approved classes is a great benefit. For operations that are not near a university, workshops are often available in all areas, whether they are sponsored through a county extension service, community college, or other organization. Employees can also be granted a few days off to attend a conference related specifically to pork production or the agricultural industry as a whole.

Additionally, 45-60 minute “Lunch and Learn” programs are also a very popular means of employee development at a very nominal cost. Programs may be on a variety of subjects, but the most popular topics relate to professional, management, and personal development. Some examples include:

- Valuing diversity
- Resolving conflicts in the workplace
- Leadership skills
- Managing time, priorities, and deadlines
- Project management basics

5. Evaluate Employee Satisfaction

To keep on top of morale, a good employer performs formative evaluations to gauge employee satisfaction. These evaluations should be administered regularly and confidentiality and anonymity is a must for unbiased results.

Summative evaluations, in the form of exit interviews, should also be considered. Outgoing employees can shed light on the issues that may have prompted them to leave.

Results from both types of evaluations can be useful in making progress toward improving employee satisfaction.

6. Prepare for the Employee’s First Day

Job satisfaction starts with day one. By planning for the employee’s first day on the job, the employer sets the standard for a satisfying—and hopefully long-term—position. Four basic steps should be taken to prepare for the new employee’s first day.

- Announce the new employee’s arrival. Inform other employees of the new employee’s start date and tell them a bit about their new team member. This may be done through an operation-wide e-mail or oral announcement.
- Prepare the work area. If the employee will be utilizing a phone, computer, or other office equipment, take care to have those items available and in good working order prior to the employee’s arrival. Any voice mail, computer systems and e-mail systems passwords should also be given to the employee on his or her first day.
- Prepare a training schedule and first assignments. In order to learn more about the operation’s history, philosophy, various departments, and policies and procedures, the new employee’s training schedule should include meetings with a number of current staff members. People that the new employee will be regularly working with should speak with the employee sometime during the employee’s first two weeks of employment. In addition, the new employee may gain clarity of the expectations set for his or her position, as well learning how the operation’s various departments work together.
- Prepare a checklist for the employee’s first day or week of work. A checklist may include activities and discussions that will promote a new employee’s understanding of the operation, department, and position. Managers should decide which activities are important and relevant to each new hire and tailor checklist and training process to meet the needs of the individual.

7. Employee Handbook

New employees are full of questions. Employee handbooks can provide excellent information and also serve many other valuable purposes, but risk and obligation comes along with that.

Ehrenfeld (1993) writes that a company handbook is an invaluable tool that describes who a company is, what it does, and what expectations exist for employees. A good handbook should include at minimum:

- The company's mission statement, history and/or philosophy
- Employment policies
- Benefits
- Employee conduct and expectations
- Health, injury and accident information
- A series of disclaimers to protect the operation from litigation, such as "The handbook is only a set of guidelines, and is not all-inclusive."

Some other items that may be included are:

- Glossary
- Organization chart
- Job descriptions
- Performance appraisals
- Overtime
- Equal employment opportunity
- Conflict resolution procedures

A final word of caution: Seek legal advice to review the language and compliance ramifications of your employee handbook. If you do not intend to follow the written policy, do not write it down. A written policy must be implemented in order to be useful. Regular monitoring and updates are recommended, with a detailed legal review.

Conclusion

It is important to identify why employees leave in order to prevent an increasing turnover rate. By creating a positive work environment, recognizing the efforts of top-notch employees, and involving employees in a variety of operational decisions, an employer can increase morale. If additional steps are taken to develop employees and evaluate ongoing job satisfaction, a swine operation manager can maintain a group of hardworking, satisfied employees.

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