

Is it a manager's job to understand what makes employees tick?

'Yes, if he wants to retain them,' says Harvard business psychologist

BY UYEN VU

Even the brightest and highest performers can get bored and fizzle. Most managers have seen it happen.

Their reports may have been geniuses in the data analysis department or absolute stars when spearheading a major marketing campaign. But things change. Their roles morph. Top performers might have been made managers because it was time to promote them and recognize their contribution. Or their once groundbreaking project has matured into a respected institution, hence less malleable. And soon enough, those erstwhile star performers may find themselves looking afar for their next move.

To Harvard Business School professor James Waldroop, the only hope of hanging on to these individuals is to understand what makes them truly happy. Once that's understood, an employer would be better off thinking about ways to align that person's job with what makes them tick.

"People are at their happiest

and most engaged at their work when what they do matches to a better degree their internal interests and patterns," said Waldroop in an interview from Brookline, Mass., where his consultancy Peregrine Partners is based.

"One of the ways a manager can get more out of people as well as encourage retention is to help that employee 'sculpt' the job that they have to better match their interests," he said.

Based on his research on psychology and individual development in the business world, Waldroop, along with his partner Timothy Butler, has identified eight general categories of interests:

- application of technology;
- quantitative analysis;
- theory development and conceptual thinking;
- creative production;
- counselling and mentoring;
- managing people and relationships;
- enterprise control; and
- influence through language and ideas.

Most people have between one and three such interests, which Waldroop said are more than hobbies and enthusiasms.

They're innate passions that are intricately linked with personality, wrote Waldroop and Butler in a *Harvard Business Review* article. These life interests "don't determine what we're good at but what kinds of work we love," they wrote.

As an example of how "job sculpting" works, Waldroop recounted a time he was working with an unnamed Canadian company.

The chief executive officer had neither a strong interest in quantitative analysis nor in working with technology, despite having created the company's information system and having "done a marvellous job on it," said Waldroop.

"Her strongest interest was in the creative area. And she was going to quit because she had created it and, at this point, it was just maintenance. There was nothing really happening for her in terms of creativity," he said.

Waldroop accompanied her to have a talk with the president of the company and explain that, with any number of offers in front of her at all times, she was thinking of leaving because she was bored.

The president then worked out a deal with the chief information officer that would give her a part to play in the company's marketing efforts, despite the fact she didn't have any experience in marketing.

"And she didn't quit. She stayed with the company. They gave her a little more money, but not a lot — certainly not enough to compensate for the fact that she now had two jobs," said Waldroop. "She was delighted. And the president was delighted because now she was staying and he was getting one and a half full-time-equivalent's worth of work out of her."

Certainly, it's not always possible to align a person's job with her interests, said Waldroop, but often it takes very little job tweaking for the individual to find the challenge she needs.

Nor does implementing this concept require a whole set of new processes, added Waldroop.

"It's true that the manager has to take a little time. That's why we've always advocated making these career development discussions part of the an-

See Next Page

■ STRATEGIC HR

Job sculpting should fall to manager-once-removed

Continued From Previous Page

nual or semi-annual performance review," he said. "We can talk about your job right now, but let's also talk about your plans, and what you are thinking about. Where do you think you'd want to go? So it doesn't require a whole new set of meetings."

The role of HR

In Waldroop's view, it's the responsibility of the individual employee to take the lead in understanding what it is she's interested in and then it's up to the manager to listen and think creatively to find solutions.

HR's role is on the sideline, helping this work by first communicating with both employees and managers to help them understand the concept and why it's a good thing, said Waldroop.

"And it is HR's job on an ongoing basis to think about the job families within a company and the interest patterns that go along with them," he said.

For example, he said, America Online has 14 different kinds of jobs that belong to one family — creative production.

"And that job family has a particular interest pattern that goes along with it. These are not managers of people. They're managers of projects," said Waldroop.

If HR can cultivate an intimate knowledge of the job families that are represented by the different jobs within a company, along with the interest patterns

for each, HR can help managers match people up with their interests.

The personal experience

At Toronto-based TD Bank Financial Group, vice-president of learning and development Jane Hutcheson said though the language of "job sculpting" needs to be tempered, she sees elements of this concept already taking place in the way the bank approaches employee career development.

"I think we're going to have to help the people managers who are key to the employee experience," she said. "People are looking for a very personal experience with an organization and you can't do that through policies, rules and programs. Those need to be in place as table stakes. But they only work if you have a way to understand each individual employee."

Citing an example from within her group, Hutcheson referred to an instructor whose goal for a number of years was to run a marathon in each of the 50 states in the United States. All that was required to help him accomplish that goal was for the team to give a thought to the marathon schedule when they co-ordinate their work.

Another example Hutcheson could think of was an employee whose job it is to deal directly with the internal business partners and help them determine what they need from the learning and development department.

"He's very good at it, and has been doing it for a while. And what he really loves to do is speak and make presentations, and he and I have built that into his job in a way that his colleagues doing the same job don't do," including going to community colleges to deliver presentations on career planning, she said.

"It's key because he has been at the bank for 30 years and doing this job for five. And it's important for him, in terms of getting a sense of satisfaction and feeling good at what he does, that the job has elements of what he loves to do."

Hutcheson said HR plays a key role in working with managers to find ways to sculpt the job and to help find other opportunities within an organization if the sculpting requires more than simply tweaking the job.

Not a manager's role?

In Hutcheson's experience, most managers understand the importance of supporting individual employees' values and interests.

"Intuitively, if you talk to managers about this approach, I think they get it," she said.

But not everyone would agree the manager is the best person to have this career development role with respect to employees. Ginty Burns, a senior partner at Toronto-based management consultants COR-Einternational, said the job would more appropriately go to the manager's manager or what

she calls the "manager-once-removed."

"The manager has goals to meet. The manager needs his or her team to focus on the results for the current week or current month or current year," said Burns. "Although some managers will do this, it's not generally in their best interest to take somebody who's really good at the current job and distract them with something that may benefit that person but not necessarily the manager."

There's a little less conflict if the career development job falls on the manager-once-removed. It's this higher up individual who has a broader view of the company, hence making it easier for him to move the employee to a position elsewhere, as well as backfill the now-vacated role with more resources.

Plus, it's already the job of the manager-once-removed to think about the next person to be filling the manager's place, so developing the people two levels down is only fitting, said Burns.

Burns also disagreed with Waldroop's suggestion that the life interest conversation can be had during a performance review.

"A performance review is all about your current performance, how well you did against your goal, and I think it's important to separate that from where you want to go," she said.

"You may not be doing very well in your current job because you're bored in your job. So when you've got to the performance review with feedback that says 'You're doing a crummy job,' it just might not be the time to say, 'Well actually I'd like your job or I'd like to be a vice-president of something.'"