Adapting to a New Generation of Employee

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Abstract
In a highly competitive era where both candidates and existing employees have more options than ever before, how do we attract and retain a new generation of employee? This is the question that I have been trying to answer for quite some time now. Ultimately, I believe the answer to this question can be answered by simply listening to candidates with the intention of understanding their needs.

As a teacher and school administrator, it was always important to try to understand the perspectives and beliefs of others in order to make sound decisions. Attracting and retaining employees is really not appreciably different. When I first began recruiting new employees to school systems, salary and benefits were always on the top of the list of what candidates were seeking. The organization with the highest pay and best benefit package usually won when it came to enticing a candidate to join the team. It was very important for potential new employees to know how much they could make, and what types of benefits the organization could offer them. Although these are still important factors, working conditions and personal growth have seemingly become more important.

The next generation of employee seems more focused on questions such as, “How will you challenge me intellectually?” “How will you help me to be successful?” or “How will you support my learning as a new employee?” My response to this is “Hurray!” We have finally arrived in an era where personal growth and a sense of belonging have become more important that salary and benefits.
Of course, as an employer it is still essential for us to be competitive with salary and benefits, but the hook that seemingly draws them in is making sure that our new employees are supported and feel valued. Little things such as providing a warm, welcoming, and supportive atmosphere are essential elements of bringing new employees into the organization. Ultimately, we have carried out our goal when a new employee begins to feel that their contributions are part of something bigger. One might say that we want them to feel like they are part of a family working together towards a common goal.

The next key element is making sure that employees feel personally challenged. As an organization, if we are not helping employees to think critically, and look for new innovations, boredom begins to set in and the grass begins to look greener somewhere else. Allowing employees to express their opinions, share their innovative ideas, and explore new ways to do business without the fear of failure is a key strategy to feed the next generation of employee. This becomes very apparent when you look at organizations that are considered employers of choice. Whether it is a flexible working environment, outdoor spaces, company “comfort perks,” or simple think tank environments where it is safe to think outside of the box, employees get a sense of fulfillment when they feel like they can meaningfully contribute to the organization.

When I hear of leaders who are frustrated by this change in employee motivation, I am curious about what it is that these leaders are really looking for. If you think about what drives the next generation of employee, their motivators are the traits (critical thinkers, innovation, resourcefulness, sense of belonging, and personal drive to succeed) that make ordinary organizations exceptional organizations. Businesses and industry have been demanding that school systems produce independent, critical thinkers, who are motivated to think outside the box and stretch the boundaries of industry and technology. Why are leaders now surprised and struggling with employees who have the very skills and traits that employers have said are essential for future success?

When we get exactly what we ask for, we need to be willing to accept and adapt the business model to help this new generation of employee thrive. By embracing the talent and innovation that exists within this talented new workforce, we all become better as a whole. Organizations become more resilient and innovative, and employees become a family, dedicated to a common goal of making a difference in the world. I believe that by learning to embrace this workplace cultural shift, we have the unique opportunity to change the workplace into a thriving environment where critical thinkers are supported and energized by the opportunity to do meaningful work.