

# Bye-bye, Boss

Why good employees leave and what to do about it BY KATE ZABRISKIE

## **"I can't take it anymore!"**

We're short-staffed, I'm killing myself to hold it together, and nobody says thank you, so goodbye! Life is too short for this. I can work somewhere else."

**"I was doing just fine working from home.** Now they're making us go back. Call me crazy, but spending three hours in the car doesn't excite me. I'm updating my resume this afternoon."

**"I'm not passionate about this place.** We're all about stuff I don't care about, I don't connect with my manager, and the pay isn't that great. I need to find a better fit."

Thoughts like these happen many times every day in organizations large and small. While a certain amount of turnover is healthy and normal, when an employer hemorrhages staff, it can take years to recover. And let's face it, retention is tough in many places. While you can't make people stay, you can take some critical actions to address the main reasons people say sayonara, so long, and see you later.

## **GOODBYE REASON ONE**

### *Employees want a better relationship with their managers*

If you haven't done a good job cultivating a good relationship with your direct reports, today is the day to start. Evaluate your behavior. Would you want to work for you? Would anyone else? Look for patterns. If people don't stick around and they don't cite another plausible reason for their decision, guess what? It's probably you. You never hear from any of them after they depart? It's definitely you.

Get honest with yourself. Are you a yeller? Inconsistent? Punishing? Self-centered? Uncommunicative? It's time to get to work. Identify the behaviors that would cause someone to leave and stop doing them. Next, identify the behaviors that will encourage someone to stay and start doing those things. Needing to be a better manager is a simple diagnosis with a hard prescription. If you don't know how to get better on your own, take a class, read some leadership books, craft an action plan, hire a coach, or pursue a combination of these actions.



**GOODBYE REASON TWO***Employees are bored or no longer challenged*

While people do outgrow jobs, and sometimes there is nowhere to move them, you can solve this problem. If people can do the job and become restless, look for special projects, cross-training opportunities, and other extras. At a minimum, that extra attention should slow their departure. If the problem is recurring, ask yourself what kind of person would be right sized for the position, and consider hiring for those attributes the next time.

**GOODBYE REASON THREE***Employees want a better work-life balance*

It's called a job, not purgatory. While certain people live to work, most people want some semblance of a life outside of work. Ask yourself if you're running a sweatshop. Does everyone need to be in the office from nine to five Monday to Friday? If not, a little flexibility can go a long way toward building loyalty and making a job attractive. Next, think about measuring people based on output instead of the hours worked. If employees must type on a keyboard a few times to satisfy some sort of monitoring software, you're most likely not endearing yourself or your organization. What? You don't trust them to do their work? Then here's a simple answer for you: anyone who needs to be micromanaged probably shouldn't have been hired in the first place.

**GOODBYE REASON FOUR***Employees don't connect with the organization or its purpose*

Not every organization touches the heartstrings, but every organization should tell its story in a compelling



Smart managers realize the cyclical nature of retention, and they do what they can to minimize goodbyes in good times and bad.

way. If it's not a story about the organization itself, perhaps it's a connection to the role. Still nothing? If what your organization does isn't setting the world on fire, think about other selling points. Could it be you have a warm and inviting family atmosphere? Are you a great training ground for something else later down the road? Can employees stop thinking about work the minute they walk out the door? With a little bit of time and effort, you can find a meaningful story for almost any organization.

*Kate Zabriskie is president of Business Training Works, Inc., a Maryland-based talent development firm.*

**GOODBYE REASON FIVE***Employees can get more money elsewhere*

As the saying goes, you get what you pay for. So, if you're paying 1983 salaries, why are you surprised when people leave? They can do better elsewhere. Nothing personal—it's just business. If you pay below-average wages and have nothing to balance the shortfall, you're going to lose people. You don't think the job is worth more money? That's too bad because your competitors do, and you lose. Stay aware of what's happening in your industry, your market, and so forth. Also, don't only offer money when people let you know they've gotten another offer—at that point, it's often too late.

Economies fluctuate. Sometimes the market favors employers, and other times employees hold a more favorable hand. Smart managers realize the cyclical nature of retention, and they do what they can to minimize the goodbyes in good times and bad. What do you need to do differently? 