

Employees losing faith in top-level managers

By Diane Stafford / The Kansas City Star

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Insufficient pay is only the second-most common reason employees leave jobs.

The first?

Lack of trust in one's senior leaders.

That's the conclusion drawn by Leigh Branham, owner of Keeping the People Inc., an Overland Park, Kan.-based research and consulting firm.

Branham, author of "The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave" and "Keeping the People Who Keep You in Business," has carved a career in trying to help employers figure out how to keep good workers.

The springboard for his specialty was getting access to about 19,000 exit interviews conducted from 1999 to 2003 by the Saratoga Institute, a third-party interview company.

From 2004 to 2008, Branham conducted his own minisurvey, taken by people who visited his Web site at keepingthepeople.com. It attracted just 256 responses, a drop in the bucket compared with the Saratoga data, but it was enough for him to draw some updated conclusions.

"People's definitions of what constitutes their senior leadership may vary, but it's clear that workers have lost faith in those at the top," Branham said.

Perhaps, he theorized, it's that workers believe "senior leaders are looking at them as commodities, as costs, rather than assets."

Workers see job cuts, they think they're underpaid, they read about stratospheric executive pay, and they feel stifled in their jobs, where training budgets are trimmed and chances for advancement are slim.

"The sense of loyalty is pretty much gone," Branham said.

The big take-away from his research, he said, is that workers leave because of pushes -- not because they were pulled away by better job offers.

The push factors, according to his survey, included feeling that the company didn't care about workers' personal development, that the overall corporate culture was unhealthy, that workers were treated unfairly, that the work was unchallenging, and that teamwork was flawed.

Only a tiny percentage of workers quit because of voluntary decisions to change careers, return to school, relocate, retire, raise a family, or to start a business.

"It's clear that workers send out signals that they're unhappy long before they actually leave," Branham said.

"But employers are not taking the time to find out what it would take to keep them. Maybe their direct managers are too busy, are supervising too many people, and don't have enough time to talk to their people."

How sad.

Unfortunately, when a good worker gave notice, the most likely employer responses were expressions of disappointment and no real effort to keep them, Branham found.

Offering a pay bump seldom works to keep an employee who's already decided to leave because of a push factor, he said.

"The failure to recognize these realities and care enough to address them not only increases turnover, it also contributes to the large-scale disengagement many employees and their employers are now experiencing," Branham said.

Diane Stafford is the workplace and careers columnist at The Kansas City Star. Her blog, workspacekc.typepad.com, includes daily posts about job-related issues of wide interest.