

Cultures of sacrifice hold little appeal at work

By LEIGH BRANHAM
Guest Columnist

Making personal sacrifices for the good of the company is a proud and time-honored tradition. It feels good to know that your long hours and commitment have helped make your employer successful, especially when you share in the rewards.

But when your company begins to expect sacrifice on a daily basis to the point of burnout, unreasonably invades your personal time with excessive demands and keeps you in a state of constant crisis, you are working in a "culture of sacrifice."

Cultures of sacrifice see their workers as costly units of production instead of human beings. They force their employees to choose between making a living and having a life.

If most of these statements describe your workplace, you work in a culture of sacrifice:



Branham

COMMENTARY

■ You are frequently asked to give up evenings, weekends or vacation time.

■ You receive frequent work-related telephone calls during evenings and weekends.

■ You miss important family events because of unreasonable work demands.

■ Your loved ones have paid a price for your frequent travel and/or relocations.

■ You are sick and tired of hearing, "We all need to do more with less."

■ The customer is always right, and you are always wrong.

■ Your manager's motto is "All work and no play makes you a valued employee."

■ Flex time is defined as "work any 18 hours you want."

■ A part-time job means a 40-hour workweek.

■ When you speak up about any of this, you are considered weak and uncommitted.

There are plenty of cultures of sacrifice around, but they are having more trouble competing for talent these days. Here are three reasons:

1) There are many more jobs than people to fill them, which makes it harder for all companies to attract and keep workers.

2) Younger workers insist on having a life outside work and are unwilling to make the same sacrifices that their parents did.

3) The first two factors have motivated more companies to try harder to become "employers of choice" by offering work force-friendly conditions and benefits and training their managers to ask, "What will it take to keep you?"

"Reciprocal commitment cultures" are achieving significant financial returns by first asking what they can give to their people.

SAS Institute, for example, saves \$67 million a year in turnover costs by asking, then providing an impressive array of benefits to its 5,000 employees. The benefit that sends the strongest message is a simple policy — the company gates do not open until 7 a.m., and they close promptly at 6 p.m. The message employees hear and appreciate is: "We want you to have a life outside work. Take care of yourself and your family, and come back refreshed enough to give your best tomorrow."

Many cultures of sacrifice have

tried to compete for workers by offering seemingly caring benefits, such as on-site massages and health club memberships, that many employees are too busy to use. Changing the benefits without changing the culture is a doomed strategy.

The toughest obstacle to culture change may lie in the fact that most senior managers have made considerable sacrifices themselves over the years and are not particularly inclined to allow younger workers to pay a lesser price than they did for success.

Nevertheless, many of these managers have accepted the fact that the rules have changed, and they are smart enough to realize that they and their companies must adapt to the new realities of the marketplace.

Leigh Branham is vice president of consulting services with Right Management Consultants, Overland Park, and leader of the firm's talent management practice in the Heartland Region. He is also the author of "Keeping the People Who Keep You in Business: 24 Ways to Hang On to Your Most Valuable Employees" (Amacom Books, 2001)

For more information, contact:

Keeping the People, Inc.

13488 West 126th Terrace
Overland Park, Kansas 66213
(913) 620-4645

E-mail Leigh Branham at LB@keepingthepeople.com
or visit our website at www.keepingthepeople.com