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THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD ON STAFF RETENTION

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Some Thoughts from The Field On Staff Retention

Workforce Development, Staff Retention

INTRODUCTION

During the months between January of 2018 and December of 2021, 350 direct care staff from 12 states were interviewed. Approximately 250 staff were interviewed before the onset of the Pandemic and approximately 100 staff were interviewed during the Pandemic.

The question of focus for the interviews was the same throughout:

“What would it take for you to agree to continue working for your present organization for at least two more years?”

Some answers and points of emphasis changed following the onset of the Pandemic.

Wages, especially, seemed to take on a more paramount importance following the onset of the Pandemic. Wages tended to be seen as indicators of safety and security. Expressions like, “Why would anyone accept or stay in a job that didn’t pay enough to meet basic food, shelter and clothing needs?” were very common after the onset.

Employers who didn’t value their safety and security needs, they said, would not be able to retain them. Safety was said to relate to both physical and emotional safety. Security was said to relate to their ability to meet basic physical, emotional and spiritual health needs.

The one message that remained consistent throughout all the interviews was that they had choices about where they work and they wanted to work for an organization that was committed to trying to maximize job satisfiers and was working to minimize job dissatisfiers.

They had some specific thoughts about what constituted job satisfiers and about what constituted job dissatisfiers. **Those are the thoughts from the field that will be explored in this Report on Staff Retention.**



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JOB SATISFIERS: ONBOARDING

Many reported that a decision on whether to stay working for an organization is often made within the first 90 days. They reported that those organizations that provide adequate emotional supports, intensive training and mentoring during those first 90 days have a clear competitive advantage over those organizations that do not.

They talked about how difficult it is for any new staff member, especially new staff members with no previous experience in the field, to survive the initial learning curve. Self-confidence is often eroded. “I want to know that someone in the organization is watching out for me and is truly interested in assuring my success.”

One said, “I am special to me. I hope that the organization that hired me believes I am a little bit special too. Don’t throw me into deep waters and expect me to just learn how to swim. I’ll drown. Give me some feedback. Let me ask some questions. Give me some answers.”

One said his mentor checked in with him about once an hour for the first few weeks. “He’d ask me how things were going and give me some feedback and offer me some tips on how to handle things. I became very close with my mentor. I trusted him. That made it all work. He boosted my self-confidence and self-awareness every day.”

Some reported that veteran staff members sometimes ignored “rookies.” One said a veteran told her, “I’ll invest in you if you stay for six months.” They said that old approach won’t work. Veteran staff have an important role in successful onboarding of new staff.

Veterans who are warm and welcoming to new staff send a message of appreciation and acceptance: two very important messages to send if the goal is to retain the new staff that are being hired.

JOB SATISFIERS: LEARNING

Someone said, “The only way to really learn what you need to know is to make mistakes and then adjust. When mistakes are made, the way that those mistakes are handled is extremely important toward retaining staff. You want to make persons aware of their mistakes, but you don’t want anybody to ever be afraid to make mistakes.”

“The world of helping persons who’ve experienced a lot of trauma is very different from other worlds. Nothing really prepares you for it. A lot of the things you’ve always done – things that always worked for you – don’t work in this world. You can’t always ask what you should do. Sometimes you just have to do something and hope it doesn’t blow up on you. When it does blow up, you have to figure out why.”



Many persons said that organizations that have a supportive learning environment have a competitive advantage in retaining staff. When organizations are designed to facilitate teaching and learning, many said, the staff within those organizations are much calmer and far less anxious. Staff can use that model to help them to learn how to teach.

Helping staff to deal with the embarrassment of making mistakes was believed to be very important for retention. "It's easy to get down on yourself when you make a mistake. That doesn't help in this line of work. You have to be able to shake it off, learn from it and move on. Those who can't learn from mistakes and move on eventually leave."

Many reported high levels of gratitude for the ways their organization handled their mistakes, especially when they were first learning the job. "They could have crushed my self-confidence if they hadn't been so understanding in those early days. They kept saying that if I learned something from the mistake and didn't repeat that mistake, it was just a part of learning the job. That's what kept me here."

JOB SATISFIERS: ADVANCEMENT

Many believed that a key to retention is being able to think of their work more as a career than as a job. Almost everyone was more likely to report a willingness to stay if they believed that advancement within the organization was possible. Few who saw no opportunity for advancement were willing to commit to stay in their current job.

Some reported that the organization's career ladder had been discussed with them and they shared how that discussion had a very positive impact on their willingness to stay.

Some of that positive impact was taken as a sign of appreciation for their hard work, some saw it as a recognition for the skills they had developed and some saw it as a chance to earn more money. Some saw advancement as a way to get exposed to a higher level of training, some saw it as a way to have a greater voice in decision making and some saw it as a way to take better care of their families.

Regardless of why they viewed advancement as being important, most agreed that a perceived ability to advance within the organization was seen as being very important for retention.

Fairness in the advancement process was also seen as being very important. "A career ladder is only attractive for me if I can be given the opportunity to climb it. If I can't see me in a leadership position, then it can't be me in any leadership position" was expressed as a statement on the importance of equity in any advancement process.

The phrase, "I want a career, not a job" was offered many times. Those organizations with fair and equitable career ladders would seem to have a competitive advantage in retaining their staff.



JOB SATISFIERS: SUPERVISION

The quality of the relationship with the person that is seen as their immediate supervisor was often reported as being “very important” in their decision on whether to commit to stay with their present organization. Most viewed their immediate supervisor as potentially the single most important person in improving staff retention.

They talked about the qualities of effective supervisors. They described persons who had developed their team well enough that they could safely share some authority and responsibility with them.

Some referred to effective supervision as “share-vision,” where both sides can sometimes take the lead and both sides offer perspectives that are considered. They said supervisors need to be well-trained, self-confident and self-aware before they can share with their staff.

They wanted supervisors who knew how to motivate, encourage, challenge and teach. They talked about the importance of being able to emotionally support staff and offer calm counsel in times of crisis.

They often described the training that is offered to supervisors as the single most important training that an organization can offer. One person said, “When supervision works the way it can and should, it can become a magnet for retaining staff.”

They also talked about the difference between supervisors who focus exclusively on management issues and supervisors who balance management needs with the application of leadership skills. The exclusive focus on management issues, they said, leads to high levels of frustration. The balanced approach, they said, leads to higher levels of job satisfaction. One said, “I will either stay for a good supervisor or I will run from a bad supervisor. Supervisors are that important.”

JOB SATISFIERS: TEAM-BUILDING

Some staff groupings form cohesive teams. Some staff groupings fight in constant scrums. Cohesive teams encourage retention. Constant scrums encourage departures. One said, “If we care for our team members, we will stay to be with them. Teams are powerful forces.”

“I enjoy working with the staff members that I work with. I enjoy coming to work with them. The work itself isn’t always fun, but the persons I work with appreciate me and support me. And that’s very important to me. We feel like we’re all in this work together.”

For most of the interviewed direct care staff, their relationships with their co-workers played a powerful role in their decision to stay or leave their organizations. If they liked their co-workers, that became a satisfier and they found it easier to manage the hardships of the job.



“They’re there at the end of a hard day. They bolster me and pick me up. They can make me laugh when I need to laugh. They can help to take the edge off the sting of a crisis, a mistake or a total failure.”

Sometimes cohesive teams just happen but, usually, they are built over time. Knowing how to build cohesive teams may prove to be a key capacity to develop if improving retention is the goal. Engaging with staff around the ways to form and sustain cohesive teams may be an important first step in the direction of addressing this need. “When we stay, we can have the backs of our friends.”

Half of the power of a good team comes from the chemistry of the staff members themselves. The other half must come from the leadership of the team. “I suppose that all teams tend to self-destruct at times. It’s up to the leaders to keep that from happening.” Team building is a very important part of retention.

JOB SATISFIERS: MISSION

Many of those interviewed used this phrase, “Everyone wants to be a part of something that is important, that is bigger than themselves.”

The nature of the work in human services is often very difficult, but the purpose of that difficult work was viewed by most of those interviewed as being very important. The Mission is the message.

“After a very hard day, or after a very hard series of days, anyone can forget why we are doing what we do. When we forget why we’re doing this, the work can seem totally absurd. We can tell ourselves we need to get an easier job. Sometimes we need to be reminded.”

Though the difficulty of the work is a clear job dissatisfier, the Mission that represents the reason for the difficult work is a clear job satisfier. That is paradoxical. “I surely don’t stay because the work is so hard. That would be crazy. I stay because the hard work is so important.”

“Don’t remind me about how important all this is after a bad day. I won’t be listening then. Remind me how important all this is after a good day. We have to learn how to recognize and celebrate our successes if we want to keep doing this work. Otherwise, it can be too discouraging. Celebrate your success or you’ll get another job.”

“My organization celebrates success as often as possible. But I know that many organizations don’t celebrate their successes very often. We have to make a big deal out of it whenever we achieve something we’ve worked hard to achieve. Kids and families get healthier. Johnny made it through a whole day of school without a blow-up. Almost every day there’s something to celebrate.”

Building celebrations into our organizational culture and connecting those celebrations to our Mission could help to improve retention.



JOB SATISFIERS: APPRECIATION

“Every day, when I first started, my mentor would say, at the end of the shift, ‘Good shift today. Good job. Thanks. Now get a good night’s sleep. You’ve earned it.’ I would keep hearing her words as I drove home. They made a big difference. I felt she appreciated me.”

“I believe that most organizations do appreciate the work of their staff, but not enough organizations have established it as a value to share their appreciation as often as we need it to be shared. I need someone to say thanks to me at least once every day that I work.”

“Showing appreciation doesn’t cost an organization anything. But it’s very important. It makes staff want to stay. It only takes a few minutes. When someone shows me some appreciation, that’s what I’ll discuss with my husband when I get home. If no one shows me any appreciation that day, I’ll just talk about how hard the job is when I get home. And then he’ll say, ‘You need to get another job.’”

“Sometimes I think that the leaders of our organization don’t really understand what we go through every day. One of the best ways that leaders can show appreciation for our work is to come here and spend a little time with us in our setting. Say thanks to us where we work.”

“I guess I do need to get some expressions of appreciation for what I do. I’m not sure why that’s so important to me. Maybe it’s because when someone expresses appreciation, at that moment, you are special. And everyone wants to be seen as being special sometimes.”

The need to build a consistent pattern of expressing appreciation to staff for the work they do every day was a persistent theme. If that pattern can be installed within the culture of organizations, it will, in all probability, eventually have a positive impact on staff retention.

JOB SATISFIERS: WELL-BEING

Well-being, understandably, skyrocketed in importance with those being interviewed, following the onset of the Pandemic. What was important before suddenly became extremely important.

The decisions that leaders were being forced to make with the onset of the Pandemic had a profound impact on the lives of their staff. How they went about making those impactful decisions was critical.

Some leaders engaged their staff in discussing the issues and sought their input before making those decisions. Those leaders tended to get high marks and a lot of appreciation for their staff engagement.

Some leaders made decisions in relative isolation from their staff. Those leaders tended to get low marks, a lot of scorn and a deep sense of resentment because of their lack of staff engagement.



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“If a decision is going to be made that will impact my personal health and safety, I want a chance for my voice to be heard about that. If I am not given a chance to share my thoughts, I’ll probably conclude that they don’t care about my health and safety. And that’s a bad message to send. Maybe I’m working for the wrong organization.”

“The Pandemic presented many challenges to the physical and mental health of our staff. Many of us were working on-site, under difficult circumstances, while others were being told it was too dangerous to leave the house. Our leaders were great supporters during all of this.”

Fully engaging with staff around those issues that relate directly to their personal health and safety sends many messages about respect, compassion, concern, and partnership. Those are the messages that will keep staff appreciating and respecting their organization.

JOB SATISFIERS: INCLUSIVENESS

“Some organizations are very open and easy to join. Some are harder to get a foothold with. Some welcome everyone right away. Some will only welcome you after you’ve been there a few years. I was welcomed right away. If I’d had to wait for a few years, I’d be gone.”

“In my last job they said that I had to pay my dues before I’d really be accepted. Paying my dues meant keeping quiet and working all the bad shifts. That’s when it became my last job and I moved to this job.”

“At my last job, you’d only be accepted if you looked like everybody else and if you thought like everyone else. I didn’t look like them or think like them, so I came here. I am still different, but that’s seems to be OK here. I fit in here. I plan to stay here for quite a while.”

“Some places barely tolerate the sharing of different perspectives, and some places truly encourage the sharing of different perspectives. I am blessed to work for the second kind. You couldn’t pay me enough to get me to work for the first kind. Life’s too short.”

“Good teams have to be inclusive. What’s the point of having a team if some folks are on the inside of the team and some folks are on the outside of the team. That’s not a team. You can’t get anything done that way. And it isn’t fair.”

“Inclusiveness is either in the culture of an organization or it isn’t. You can’t fake inclusiveness. The culture says you either draw everyone into your organization or you keep some persons out.”

Inclusiveness was reported as being very important to many of the interviewed direct care staff. Many said that inclusiveness was a prerequisite for their commitment to stay with their organization.



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JOB SATISFIERS: PARTNERSHIP

“The traditional relationship between employers and employees is changing. The organization has the power to hire, evaluate and fire us. But while we are here, we would like a seat at the table to discuss those items that impact us the most. We don’t want to make those decisions. We just want to have an opportunity to discuss them.”

“When you work in the trenches you may see things a bit differently. We know that sometimes we only see the walls of the trenches. But we always know how much water is in the bottom of the trench. If anyone ever need to know how much water is down here, just ask us. We’ll tell you. Sometimes those water levels might be important.”

“If our Mission is to be effective, it has to be the Mission for everyone in the organization. It must be the Board’s Mission, the CEO’s Mission, the Senior Leadership Team’s Mission and it has to be our Mission too. Invite some direct care staff members to help to figure out the best ways for our organization to advance our Mission.”

“Is there anything wrong with having a few of the direct care staff participate in the Strategic Planning process for our organization? Wouldn’t that help to create co-ownership for the Strategic Plan?”

“Not every staff member is looking to develop a partnership with the organization. Some just want to put in their hours and consider this a job. But some staff members are looking for a partnership with the organization and want to get more involved. And some of those who want to get more involved are the staff you most want to retain.”

There are a lot of ways to engage with staff from listening sessions to full partnership opportunities. The “star performers” among the staff often want a chance to be more involved, to form a full partnership.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: NON-NEGOTIABLES

“The things that staff really hate are the non-negotiables. Those are the things that are mandated by legislation, regulation or by the procedures for billing for our services. You have no choice. You just have to do them. But we hate them because, as we see it, the time they take is time that gets taken away from helping our clients.”

“Documentation is a royal pain. I understand that we need to document everything we do to create a record of what we do. ‘If it isn’t documented, it wasn’t done.’ But that’s not what I signed up for. Time spent on documentation seems like wasted time to most of us.”



“A whole lot of the things I have to do are just checking off boxes to prove to someone that we examined the fire extinguisher expiration dates or took a first aid or CPR course. Don’t get me wrong, I know that those are all important things to do. But there are tons of those busy-work kinds of things to do and they can really drag you down.”

“I am a therapist and I love the work I do with my clients. Part of the deal is maintaining a certain level of productivity. I need to see so many clients each week regardless of whether they cancel or fail to show up. I know productivity levels are important because that’s how the money is earned to pay me. But productivity adds to the stress.”

To minimize the high levels of dissatisfaction with the non-negotiables, some organizations have begun to engage their staff by asking how the organization can help them to make those non-negotiables more endurable. “We can’t do much about what we have to do but we can talk about how we should go about doing them.”

Specifically, organizations are looking for IT solutions and other assists they can add to make doing the non-negotiables seem less offensive.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: FEAR

“No one likes to admit that they are sometimes quite afraid while doing their job. It seems like a sign of weakness to admit it. But managing feelings of fear are clearly a part of the job these days. The needs of our clients are more severe and the emotional regulation issues we deal with are deep. We often face dangerous situations.”

Because of the stigma often connected to staff members admitting to feelings of fear, those feelings often go unaddressed until something dangerous happens and then staff members often react intensely.

“The client was hurt during an in-home visit. Things got out of hand very quickly. The abusive ex-husband showed up and the shouting led to fists being thrown and his former wife ended up in the hospital. Our staff member wasn’t hurt physically, but she sure was terribly frightened. There was nothing she could do. Staff was very upset.”

Organizations need to prepare to respond both proactively and compassionately to dangerous situations involving their staff. They do come up. Staff need to see that the organization cares about both the staff member and the client by how they handle dangerous situations.

Fear isn’t only real to the staff member who is involved. All staff will feel the fear in these situations. “That could have been me” will be a common response. Organizations need to engage with their staff around their fears that arise from these kinds of dangerous situations.



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“Organizations need to ask their staff what the organization needs to do to help them to feel safe.” This kind of engagement around safety issues is essential. No attempt should be made to minimize the importance of their fear. Fear is a very powerful force. Persons leave the field when they feel they are no longer safe in the work they do.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: ANXIETY

“Anxiety is pure kryptonite for direct care workers in today’s work environments. We really don’t talk about it. But I’d say more people probably leave because their anxiety levels just got too high than for any other reason. Anxiety can be super powerful. It can shut you down, disrupt your ability to think straight and solve problems and it can even cut down your ability to get calm and get to sleep at night.”

“Once you start feeling very anxious it can be hard to settle yourself. You can get very anxious for a lot of reasons, if you make a mistake, if you don’t know how to do something you need to know how to do, if you forgot to do something important. It can snowball on you. If you’ve got a good supervisor, they can pull you out of it and set you straight. But if you don’t, you just get worse until you leave.”

“When you think about it, it makes a lot of sense. We are constantly surrounded by mountains of anxiety every day as we interact with those we are helping. If we aren’t careful, we’ll absorb their anxiety. We really need some training in how to avoid absorbing anxiety.”

Many of those interviewed expressed a need to receive training and support in the practice of emotional regulation. Many seemed to have a sense that part of that training would lead to a heightened level of self-awareness that could help them to respond by calming down when their emotions were just beginning to escalate.

Building this capacity for emotional regulation into the training offered to supervisors would appear to be very wise. Supervisors today must be quite expert in emotional regulation – experts in practicing it themselves and experts in teaching its use to those they supervise and support. In this area, organizations can be proactive or reactive. Proactivity will lead to retaining many good staff members.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: WAGES

“Everyone asks the same question, ‘Is the money they pay me a fair wage for what I do?’ If you answer yes, and there are no other things to push you away, you’ll probably stay. If the answer is no, even if there are some things that you might stay for, you’ll probably leave.”

“Fairness” was mentioned as a consideration in the discussions on wages in the pre-Pandemic interviews. It was somewhat like the weather in that it came up and then it went away. In the interviews that came after the onset of the Pandemic, fairness was a discussion consideration that came and then stayed. Something had changed.



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Some spoke of the fact that they were asked to work when the rest of the country was shut down. They noted that nurses, doctors, fire fighters and police officers were given praise and appreciation as first responders for their effort when the country was shut down. Many mentioned that they were not. From that exclusion, some concluded that what they have been doing isn't being valued very highly.

"Those of us who've been doing this for quite a while have gone a long time and gotten very little in the way of increases to our pay. There were a lot of reasons for that. But I think that a lot of us have decided that we can't really raise a family on these wages. You can get more money by leaving for another job in the same field or by getting a job in another field. Many will move to get a fair wage."

Question: "If you are looking for another job, will you move for a job paying under the market rate?"

Answer: "Absolutely not."

Wages are now seen by many as a metaphor for both appreciation and safety. The level of dissatisfaction for wages below the market rate is exceptionally high. It is wise to respect the market rates.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: FATIGUE

In the pre-Pandemic interviews, the concept of "burnout" was most often described simply as "emotional fatigue." After the Pandemic onset, burnout was most often described as emotional and physical exhaustion. That reflected how much the circumstances in the work environment changed with the onset of the Pandemic.

"Shift workers have been killed during the Pandemic. Coverage needs to be provided. If one staff is sick, you spread everyone a little bit to cover for the open shifts. If four out of eight are sick, you are then pushing everyone who isn't sick way, way, way beyond their physical and emotional limits to cover a LOT of shifts. It's normal to really resent that. And when it goes on, over time, you really resent that."

Staff working from home had their special challenges too. "Kids and work are a strange and stressful mixture. Kids and work and in-home schooling is a very strange and stressful mixture. There were a lot of good parts about working from home. Maybe more good than bad. But it was very tiring to always be working and always be parenting."

The question of how a supervisor can provide adequate emotional supports to staff who are working from home came up often. "You can provide emotional supports over zoom but it's not the same. It helps you to realize the special challenges that we all face in providing those emotional supports to clients over zoom. It's not the same."

Someone said, "Everyone's not burned out, but everyone I know is clearly fatigued. Too much change, too many adjustments, too much uncertainty. And it seems like there's no end in sight."



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When you get this tired, it's easy to blow small stuff out of proportion. We've all got to watch for that, with ourselves and with those we're serving." Self-care has never been more important for us all to focus on with staff.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: EXPECTATIONS

"They keep adding expectations to my job, but they never take any expectations away. I think it has become an undoable job. I like the job and I like the people I work with. We all feel the same about this. We all want to stay. But most of us will probably leave and try to find a job that we can do without always feeling so guilty."

Direct care staff who were around before the Great Recession tend to believe that's when all the "unrealistic expectations" got started. "I think that most organizations downsized a lot of middle managers during the Great Recession. Those positions never came back. All the work they used to do just got spread around. It's time to redesign jobs and cut out some things so everyone can have a realistic job."

The interest in redesigning jobs was by no means universal, but those proposing the idea made a rather passionate and compelling case for at least considering it. "If we did nothing else, we could at least reconsider all the meetings we expect people to attend. How many of those meetings are essential? Free up that time and everyone wins."

"I don't know the last time the job descriptions in my organization were redesigned, but it had to have been a long time ago. There are some things in my job description that haven't been done for at least five years. And there are things I do every day that aren't even mentioned. The field has changed quite a bit in the last five years."

The act of eliminating some non-vital expectations from some jobs to make those jobs more "doable" might send a message that needs to be sent at this time. Asking, "Are there some things that we are expecting staff to do that we really could survive without anyone ever doing again?" if the answer is yes, it might be a good idea to simply eliminate them and thereby send a supportive message to the staff.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: ANGER

"Think of how much gets knocked off the tracks because of anger. For me, for my co-workers and for my clients. There's not a day that goes by where I don't have to find a way to address someone's anger. I need training to help me understand the dynamics of anger."

A good number of those interviewed reported that it was the anger that they had to deal with every day in the work that they do that would be the factor most likely to push them out of their current job.



“If you could take away the explosive anger I have to contend with, this would be a pretty good job. I love everything but the anger. But with that anger, it is a nightmare. Sometimes, quite literally. I have nightmares where I relive some of those worst explosive episodes.”

“We do need better training to help us to deal with all the anger. What in your life before you started this work, prepares you for that? You may have experienced anger in others before but now you’re responsible to find a way to deal with it. Sometimes I’m clueless.”

“When we are feeling the most helpless, it’s likely to be in a situation that’s filled with someone’s intense anger.” Anger is often a mask emotion that’s used to cover for other emotions like anxiety and fear. Training in trauma and how trauma can create and power someone’s anger, can help staff to learn how to help avoid anger escalations and how to deescalate presentations of anger when it can’t be avoided.

Those who reported that they had received training in trauma and anger management believed it was a very important training to receive. They believed it helped them personally and professionally and they also felt it helped with their work with others who had anger issues. Many reported that they felt safer after receiving the training.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: BALANCE

“I have two children. They are very important to me. I have a husband. He is very important to me. And I have a job that is very important to me as well. At the end of the day, I have to be able to meet all three sets of needs. When I can do that, I am a happy woman. When I can’t do that, I’m not. If everyone is reasonable with their demands on me, it can all work out. If one of them gets unreasonable, we have a big problem.”

Most of those interviewed spoke about the importance of having a work/life balance. When it is present, it is viewed as a strong job satisfier. When it is absent, it is viewed as a strong job dissatisfier.

It is listed here as a job dissatisfier because few of those interviewed, either pre-Pandemic or after it’s onset, reported that they felt they had achieved an acceptable level of work/life balance.

There were many references to always being expected to respond quickly to emails and texts, even when not working, of being expected to respond to a change in scheduling at a moment’s notice, of being expected to take calls at home and to work on projects at home. There were many references to how issues lingering from the day’s work stayed with them and distracted from “being with my family.”

“Work/life balance is an organizational culture proposition. If the organization gives you permission to claim some space for your family, you get that space. If the organization has an understanding that you will always be available, you just don’t get any space.”



Given the importance of work/life balance to most of the 350 persons interviewed, it would seem to be wise for organizations to explore whether their respective cultures permit and encourage a balance.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: COMMUNICATION

Of all the thoughts that were offered by those being interviewed on the performance of their respective Executive Leaders, the lowest marks were usually offered for their internal communications with their staff. The ratings were low in the pre-Pandemic interviews and fell even lower after the onset of the Pandemic.

“I know it’s hard to get the word out about what’s happening to all the staff in an organization, but it seems like my CEO has just stopped trying. It wasn’t great before, but now it’s just terrible.”

“When a lot of things are happening, don’t the leaders know that if they don’t get some clear communications out to their staff, the staff will just make things up about what’s happening? You can either communicate with your staff by the information you send out or you can communicate with your staff by the rumors that are circulating. Right now, it’s mostly communication by those circulating rumors.”

It seems that the traditional patterns of communicating with staff have broken down in many organizations. That is understandable given the historic nature of the emerging issues that are hitting most organizations. Communications, nonetheless, have become a major source of job dissatisfaction within many organizations. Staff want more information, on a timely basis, than they are getting now.

The challenge for many Executive Leaders is to know what their staff most want to hear about. The only sure way to know that is to ask, even though whatever is requested will surely change over time. This is one of those dissatisfiers where the goal is clearly to try to minimize the level of dissatisfaction. The answers to what staff need most will probably keep changing so leaders have to just keep asking what their staff need most in terms of communications.

JOB DISSATISFIERS: CHANGE

Some changes are relatively small and don’t require the development of any new skills. There is not usually a lot of significant resistance to those small changes. Everyone adjusts and accepts them.

Second-order changes are different. They require both the development of new skills and the replacement of some long-standing habits. Second-order changes are often resisted and can quickly become job dissatisfiers if they aren’t handled in the right way.

“It’s not like we’re saying we won’t make the changes. We will. It’s just that changing takes more time than we’re usually given. You can’t just go out and buy those new skills at a hardware store. And old



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habits are really hard to break. It should be enough to just keep making steady progress on the changes. We can't change overnight."

"Leaders should forecast the changes before we have to make them. Give us some time to talk about them. Let us fight about them a little bit. That's just normal stuff. Listen to us. Be patient. Answer our questions. We'll agree to make the changes. But changing is hard."

"Don't accompany any changes with anger or threats. That'll only make things worse. Be clear on what we have to do and why we have to do it. Then give us some space to accept it and then agree to do it."

For some, developing the new skills is the greatest hurdle for others, it's the replacement of those long-standing habits. There are a few who won't agree to the changes because they just don't believe in them. To encourage retention, leaders need to patiently teach the new skills, support staff in replacing their old habits and stay positive through the process of helping staff to adapt to the needed changes.



SUMMARY OF THOUGHTS FROM THE FIELD ON STAFF RETENTION

EFFORTS TO MAXIMIZE JOB SATISFIERS:

- 1. ONBOARDING – Provide adequate emotional supports, intensive training and mentoring during the first 90 days of employment.**
- 2. LEARNING – Work to install a learning environment that allows for mistakes and offers ongoing support and encouragement.**
- 3. ADVANCEMENT – Work to ensure the presence of and access to a career ladder that is fair and equitable for everyone.**
- 4. SUPERVISION – Help every supervisor to learn the best ways to proactively motivate, encourage, challenge, support and teach.**
- 5. TEAM-BUILDING – Help leaders understand the importance of teams and to learn how to build and maintain cohesive teams.**
- 6. MISSION – Make sure leaders can connect the daily work to the Mission and can appreciate the power of celebrating successes.**
- 7. APPRECIATION – Work to assure that all leaders understand the absolute importance of expressing daily appreciation to all staff.**
- 8. WELL-BEING – Engage with staff around personal health and safety issues before any big decisions are made in these areas.**
- 9. INCLUSIVENESS – Work to build inclusiveness as a value into the culture of the organization and then monitor for inclusiveness.**
- 10. PARTNERSHIP – Afford star performers who are interested an opportunity to engage as full partners with the organization.**



EFFORTS TO MINIMIZE JOB DISSATISFIERS:

- 1. NON-NEGOTIABLES** – Explore IT solutions and other assists for staff to help to make the non-negotiables seem less offensive.
- 2. FEAR** – Ask the staff what the organization needs to do to help them feel safe in their jobs and then do what they are asking.
- 3. ANXIETY** – Offer training around the practice of emotional regulation and assure the supervisors can support this practice.
- 4. WAGES** – Do whatever needs to be done to assure all positions are paid at the market rate that is connected to those positions.
- 5. FATIGUE** – Train all leaders in self-care and then establish the value of self-care as a key element of the organization’s culture.
- 6. EXPECTATIONS** – Consider a review of all job descriptions to assure that everyone in the organization has a “doable” job.
- 7. ANGER** – Offer trauma-informed care and anger management training and monitor to see that “practice integrates training.”
- 8. BALANCE** – Assure that work/life balance is a value and that everyone has the space to have a family life away from work.
- 9. COMMUNICATION** – Engage with staff to identify what are the communications they most need and then deliver those items.
- 10. CHANGE** – Leaders need to patiently teach new skills, support efforts to replace old habits and stay positive in change efforts