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THE MAGAZINE OF USENIX & SAGE

April 2004 • volume 29 • number 2

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### THE WORKPLACE

Russo: Keeping Employees by Keeping Them Happy,  
Part III

**USENIX**

The Advanced Computing Systems Association

# keeping employees by keeping them happy

## Part III — The Finer Points

Employee retention is a difficult challenge that faces most managers today. This is the third in a series of articles designed to help managers better understand the unique needs of employees, the measures necessary for keeping them happy, and the justification and reasoning for doing so.

If you have missed one or more of the articles in this series, please feel free to read them at the author's Web site, located at <http://www.3rdmoon.com/crusso/articles>.

Once you have the basics down of ensuring that you are not personally a management problem for your employees, it is time to start working on the slightly more advanced principles of keeping your staff happy. I feel it is important to stress again that these are ideas most of which I use and all of which I have found to be successful. The important thing is to pay attention to what is going on in your team and be creative. Remember – every situation, every company, every group, every employee is different!

### Bad Apples

Any employee can have a very significant effect – either positively or negatively – on the general morale and well-being of your team members. It is very important to understand that the impact of a single team member run amok can turn your good employees into bad ones.

For example, let's say that you have someone on your team who is consistently late, not covering their workload, and causing more problems than they resolve. Your other team members are ultimately going to have to pick up the slack for this person, which is going to be very frustrating for them. Over the long haul, they are likely to start wondering why they are bothering to work so hard, when clearly it doesn't matter all that much anyway – after all, if that one lackluster employee can shirk duties so egregiously with no concern for accountability, then why shouldn't they?

Or say that you have a great team that has been working together and doing a fantastic job for months. One day you bring in a new employee and it becomes evident within the course of a week or two that the person is not working out. Perhaps he is completely ignoring standards that your team agreed on, or maybe he's not bothering to attend meetings that are critical to the operation of the team. Maybe the person has key information that he's not inclined to share with others. Any of these things can be very disruptive and frustrating for your staff, which once again will promote dissatisfaction and unhappiness.

One way or another, a bad employee is likely to appear in your team eventually. It just happens. Sometimes you make a bad judgment call on a hire; other times, people have serious life problems that affect their work; and sometimes people have simply been on the job a little too long and need to get away – temporarily or permanently. You need to deal with such problems quickly and efficiently or your team productivity will come crashing down around you.

by Christopher M. Russo

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## **Hiring the Right People**

The first and simplest step in avoiding a bad apple is to do your best to steer clear of hiring them in the first place. This may seem like an oversimplification – primarily because it actually is. Doing this properly is an enormous amount of work and will take great dedication from both you and your team members.

First, be certain to spend some time working with your team to clearly define what kinds of people you are looking for, and how many of each type you would like to have. It is also very important not only to focus on the skills that you are seeking but also to coordinate with the personality types and general qualities that would make an individual a success in your organization. Having this definition ready and available will help you and your team to make decisions during the hiring process about who is appropriate and who is not. Keep in mind that this definition is likely to change on a daily basis, depending on how the team grows, what needs come and go, and how much you learn about your own team's needs through the process. Be sure to consider this constantly and rethink it often.

Second, have your team members interview all prospective candidates when they come in for interviews. When the interviews are complete, make sure that you have a discussion with all of the members in the interview process before you make your final decision. In some cases, you may need or want to get the entire team into a room to discuss the issue for 15 minutes or so and try to come to a consensus on how you should proceed. This not only helps you ensure that you have found the right person, but also makes certain that the decision to, or not to, hire someone is a decision made by the team and not just by you. People brought in under these circumstances are usually far more successful, because the members of the team feel that they were genuinely involved in the decision, and have an even more deeply vested interest in the new person's success.

## **Dealing with the Wrong People**

When you do find that someone on your team has a problem, you must deal with him or her quickly and effectively. There really is no short way to explain how to handle this – it is a long and arduous process that can take weeks or even months to resolve. The best I can do within the scope of this document is to give some basic tips.

First, be sure to speak to the employee immediately. Try to communicate in a constructive and positive way and gently articulate the reasons for your distress. Always approach the situation from a standpoint of “I’m certain this is not deliberate, so how can I help you address it?”

Second, document everything. This is painful but critical, because if your dealings with this person wind up resulting in a dismissal, you will need the documentation to work with HR, and possibly even the legal department, to back up your decision.

Third, if it looks even slightly worse than a “quick fix,” be sure to involve HR right away. Call your business representative and explain the situation and see what is the best approach to handle such issues within your particular organization.

Fourth, bolster and protect your team. This is a tough one. It is important for your team to be aware that you know of the problem and are attending to it, as it will help alleviate their feelings of distress that you may be ignoring the issue that is causing them so much pain. However, it is inappropriate and potentially damaging to the rela-

tionship between the troubled member and your team if you handle this poorly. Again, talk with HR and see how they feel you should best handle it.

Last, remember to keep your cool. This is often very difficult, as sometimes employees like these are causing you as much pain as they are causing your staff – in many cases, they may even be causing you more. If you lose it and start yelling or handling things in an unprofessional manner, it's going to hurt your chances of turning it around, and may even wind up landing you in court.

### **The Wrong Way to Use Contractors**

Contractors are an excellent way to supplement your team's skill set and ensure you have a little more manpower behind your projects. However, if handled improperly, contractors can be a horrible detriment to your team's productivity and morale.

The absolutely worst approach is for a manager to view a contractor as a "hired gun" – someone to come in and "clean up this mess," "really bring this team into line," or anything of that sort. In other words, if you plan on bringing in some contractor to act as some sort of renegade, working in their own way, ignoring the team – or, worse, deliberately slamming the team and the way they work – then the results are likely to be disastrous.

This misguided approach is often the result of a manager trying to "catch up" or "get ahead" by "bringing someone in who really knows [some skill]." To many such managers this seems like a great idea, but the result is usually the same. It may very well get the project done and out in time, but there's a very good chance that the project may not even be right because the contractor has worked alone, and it's almost certain that the contractor and their final result will upset everyone in the team. What's more, your team is going to hold you accountable, not the contractor. Clearly this will be very damaging to your own relationship with your staff.

The trick is to treat contractors almost exactly like everyone else. Obviously, there is not usually justification for sending contractors to training (and your permanent staff may resent you for doing so), but put your consultants through exactly the same interview process as anyone else. In fact, you should consider being more strict on the requirements than you would with a permanent candidate, because the contractor will have less time to ramp up and no justification for training.

Once the contractor is in your organization, be sure to mentor and guide her or him through the ramp-up period as you would anyone else, and be certain to involve the contractor in every aspect of the team relationship that you can – from meetings to game nights. He or she need to be a member of the team through and through. Personally, I call my contractors "temporary permanent staff." It's a distinction that makes a big difference in my team, and even seems to make the contractors happy, since I treat them with more respect and consideration than many of their other clients do.

### **Mentorship**

One of the most frustrating and distressing things for a new employee is to have no idea what they should be doing with their time. Most people feel pretty bad when they have to "bother the manager" with questions about what they should be doing, and they feel even worse when they spend a whole day sitting in the office staring at the wall.

Treat contractors almost exactly like everyone else.

Granted, if they are staring at the wall you may have other issues, but the easiest way to avoid this problem is to assign the new person a mentor the first day they come in the door.

Mentors are great, because they can guide the new employee through the rigors of getting started up in your organization, as well as assigning them some initial tasks that they should be doing to come up to speed. Additionally, they can be the first point of contact for basic questions such as “Where do I fill out time sheets?” “Where can I get CDs to install Visual Basic?” or even “Where is the lunchroom?”

Assigning a mentor will also enable you, the manager, to go about your business without being concerned that you are not unfailingly available for your new employee. I spend about half of my time in meetings – this can sometimes make me fairly inaccessible, and the last thing I want is for my new employee to feel like he or she cannot get help on his or her first days of work. Most of my staff members, however, are usually around, so if one of them is acting as a mentor to the new employee, there’s almost always someone available to handle such issues. Plus, if something comes up that does need my immediate attention, the mentor knows how to find me and will be less nervous about disturbing me when it is appropriate.

Be sure to define the parameters of the mentor role with the chosen staff member. For example, it’s perfectly appropriate for my new guys to talk to their mentor about technical issues such as where our documentation is kept and how to fill out a timesheet, but it is inappropriate for them to discuss their compensation or other personnel-related issues.

### **Promote an Environment of Communication**

There is absolutely no question that if there is not ample communication within your team, you will have many problems, and most people will find themselves frequently frustrated with you and other team members.

One of the best ways I have found to ensure that communication flows within my group is to promote a very casual atmosphere. The simple fact is that I tend to hire people who are interesting, bright, and capable. Because of this, I often find that I enjoy talking with them and attempt to engage them on non-work-related topics all the time. Since I happen to come from the same general background as most of my employees, this is usually pretty easy. (We’re a bunch of geeks with some really odd hobbies.)

In time, I find that the employees frequently stop by my office to say hello and talk about whatever happens to be on their mind. More often than not it’s just something funny or a mention of a new way to tweak up my 3-D card, but a lot of the time the conversations are work-related, or possibly just taper into a work-related discussion within a few minutes.

It seems very non-productive on the surface, and people do spend an incredible amount of time in my office talking about movies, X10, Team Fortress Classic, and all manner of things. It seems, however, to make it very easy for my staff to approach me with pretty much anything, and since people come to talk to me frequently, I also get a steady flow of information about what is going on in my team.

The other wonderful side-effect is that other team members usually jump in on conversations, which means that not only are my staff more comfortable with me, but also

with each other. This helps everyone communicate on issues that are more serious with less stress and consternation – after all, how can anyone be so bad if they have their house X10ed to the rafters and are completely addicted to capping people with a sniper rifle in a 3-D computer world, right?

## Resources

Your employees cannot do their jobs unless you provide the resources that they need to do them. It seems like a very simple statement, yet for some reason traditional management seems more concerned about the more obvious budget and time issues that are right in front of them, and are unable to see the long-term effects of “cutting a few dollars here and there.”

If I told you that I wanted you to build a house, but only made available one box of nails and a rock to bang them in with, you'd think I was crazy. You would think I was even crazier if you had almost no idea how to build a house at all, and that I refused to give you any sort of training on how to do it or any money to hire someone else to do it for you.

How is that any different from asking someone to administer a new technology and not allowing them to attend training on it? Or even to go to the store to buy a book? Would you want to be in a situation where your job depended on your ability to support a production service or product that you didn't know from a hole in the wall? I don't think so.

Books are ridiculously cheap. Consider how much it costs to pay your employees by the hour (roughly their salary divided by 2000), and try to figure out how many hours it will take of your employee banging his head against the wall on a difficult problem with the service, and then compare it to the price of the book. In most cases, you can fairly well assume that you are costing your company money by not allowing them to purchase it.

Now consider that training – it's a lot more expensive, right? Most technical training seminars run on the order of \$1200–2500. Certainly, even if you figure several tough problems appearing and figure in the hourly rate of your employee, you're not likely to quite make up that figure.

However, consider the fact that the time your employee is wasting is actually compounded by the fact that they cost a heck of a lot more than just their salary. In most cases, if you include all the support staff, facilities and equipment costs, health insurance and other benefits, you can almost double the cost associated with your employee spinning his or her wheels for hours on end.

Now factor in the aspect that your employee is likely to be working on something that is holding up your company's productivity – and this is most especially true in the technology field. What if your mail server or file server goes down? Perhaps your source control is damaged and you are unable to complete that big project, or lose hundreds of hours of development time for a staff of 10. What if your e-commerce Web site is losing out on hundreds of orders every hour . . . every minute . . . while your bewildered staff member fumbles through online support pages for six hours? Ouch. That's getting very expensive, very quickly.

Consider, too, that your employee is most likely miserable during this time period. He is stressed more than you can possibly imagine, feeling helpless, lost, and totally unable

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Very few companies train their employees properly, if at all.

to deal with a problem that he knows full well is crushing the company's productivity. Not to mention that you are probably going to be yelled at by your management for the same reason. Needless to say, this will make neither you nor your employee feel very good about his life in his present role, and if it keeps up he is very likely to quit.

Now what if your employee could have fixed the entire thing in under an hour had you had the forethought to send your employee to training and had bought a couple of books?

There's also a very interesting twist on this theme – as I mentioned, most management does not seem to get this, so very few companies train their employees properly, if at all. If you do train your staff properly, they will be very happy, reluctant to leave, and word on the street will be that you take good care of your staff, which will actually attract more talent to your organization.

### **DeMotivational Posters**

"Aspire!" "Success!" "Achievement!" . . . "Rubbish!"

Good lord. What pointy-haired, disconnected, completely unaware individual decided that those posters were a "great way to motivate the staff"? For the most part, they do the exact opposite.

Most people are very critical of things like this, and it usually boils down to a simple formula: If you have to say it, then there is a very good chance that either you're not doing it or it isn't working.

My company recently posted an enormous banner on the outside of the building touting the company name and "A great place to work!" Now, truth be told, I actually agree with this statement, but every single one of my staff looked at that and groaned painfully, because it is indicative of the kind of management that just doesn't get it. I'm happy to report that the banner only stayed up for a couple of weeks, and I'm pretty sure it was taken down because they got lambasted for it.

Believe me, rather than investing \$5000 to have a big banner printed with some goofy slogan, to be plastered on the side of the building for all to see and despise, have free ice cream day in the cafeteria every Friday for a few months. Then rather than claiming that it is a great place to work, it actually will be. I'm certainly not attempting to claim that the availability of frozen dairy products makes a workplace, but keep going with this general approach and you'll get there eventually.

### **Buzzword Bingo**

Along the same line as DeMotivational Posters is the excessive use of industry buzzwords and catch phrases. To understand what I am talking about, it is important to understand what I mean by each. When I say "buzzword," I am referring to the continual dropping of words that relate to hot topics in the industry. "ASP," "Information Super Highway," "intranet," and "e"-anything are good examples. When I say catch phrases, I'm referring to words and phrases that are used by people to quickly and conveniently summarize a commonly used business or industry concept. For example, "I don't think my team has the bandwidth to support that" or "Let's put a stake in the ground."

The reason that they are similar to the DeMotivational Posters is that those who use them repeatedly are usually demonstrating only that they are too wrapped up in the "secret handshake and code word" of management and aren't really saying anything

with any substance. Think about it. What does “I think we have the bandwidth to support this plug-and-play operation, assuming that everyone is motivated and we really put a stake in the ground” mean? It sounds like a whole lot of nothing.

This sort of behavior makes the manager exhibiting it look really foolish, both in the eyes of his or her staff and in those of other people in the organization. And the manager looking bad can reflect directly upon the manager’s team as well. Of course, this makes the team feel badly about their situation, and generally makes them very unhappy.

I worked in one environment where the people on my team wrote a program that would generate random bingo cards where the values in the squares were buzzwords and catch phrases. They would bring these to meetings conducted by a certain manager, and would play a game of buzzword bingo during the meeting. Many times during such meetings, someone would suddenly yell out “BINGO!” Appropriately enough, the manager usually laughed and had absolutely no idea that he was openly being made fun of. All hail Dilbert.

### **Work Should Be Fun**

I don’t know about anyone else, but I don’t personally want to do anything that isn’t fun. In fact, pretty much my only goal in life is to ensure that each and every day is as fun-filled as humanly possible.

Therefore, I work very hard to promote a work environment that is all about doing what makes my staff happy, as long as it can fit within the needs of the business. If I cannot find one of my staff a role that makes them happy within the needs of the business, I will try my hardest to get them into a department where they will be happy. My goal is to make it so that every morning my staff members jump out of bed, excited to go to work. When the day is coming to a close, I want them to be so excited about what they are doing that they literally have to tear themselves away from their project – not because I want them to work long hours, just because I want them to be enjoying themselves.

If you can promote such an attitude within your organization, you are likely to have a lot of happy people — after all, if they’re having fun, they will be happy.

### **Game Night**

Believe it or not, I go out and buy games like Quake III Arena and Half Life and expense them to the company. Then I give each of my employees a copy and have them install them on their machines at work. Then, every Tuesday night I buy everyone dinner and we sit around the office for several hours playing games.

It’s very funny.

To make it even more entertaining, I hook up a conference call and we all get on and yell at each other while we’re playing.

I’ve been doing this kind of thing at work for several years now, and truth be told I actually do it primarily because it’s just a heck of a lot of fun. However, I was recently taken aback when one of my staff pulled me aside and said, “Chris, I feel very tight with this team, and I think the thing that really brought us closest together were these silly game nights.”

What does “I think we have the bandwidth to support this plug-and-play operation, assuming that everyone is motivated and we really put a stake in the ground” mean?

Little freebies always seem to make people happy.

I was floored. Certainly, I figured having fun together would promote some level of team friendship, but I never thought it would be so significant. Needless to say, we still play every Tuesday night, and we even try to involve members from other groups. It's been so successful that my boss has specifically asked me to set up a game server accessible to the Internet so that people in remote locations can join in the fun.

It's usually a little difficult to get everyone to play the first night, as people tend to be squeamish about it – either because they've never played or think it's "weird." Encourage them at least to give it a shot, because it's a great time and well worth it.

### **Thanks for Coming to Work: Have a Shirt!**

It's really kind of strange, but little freebies always seem to make people happy. I'm no different. I couldn't be more pleased than when someone gives me a shirt, or takes me out for lunch, or gives me a free Porsche. OK, I'm dreaming a bit here.

The point is that little things like this really make a big difference to people, especially when given at strategic times. If my team works incredibly hard for months on end to roll out a new and important product, I try to commemorate the occasion by having a shirt or other article of clothing made with the company logo and possibly a small bit of tasteful text with the team and/or product name embroidered on it.

It doesn't necessarily have to be for big team wins, either. In some cases, I have given out a shirt or some other small token because one individual really worked far beyond what was reasonable on a critical issue, or when someone did another team a favor that was particularly noteworthy.

It doesn't really even have to be something that one gives for a win. Despite my continual attempts to discourage it, many of my staff members feel compelled to work late nights and over weekends. For these people, I try very hard to run out and get them some food, or at least encourage them to order something and expense it. I have even driven 45 minutes back to work on a Sunday to deliver lunch to a couple of guys who were hard at work trying to get a product out the door before noon on Monday.

Keep in mind that no one said it had to be food or clothing! It could be a silly toy or possibly even something grandiose like a bonus or a weekend getaway for the employee and his or her partner. Maybe a week of cleaning service or pet care for a staff member who is having a hard time pulling away from work. The point is to be creative.

Now, many people may start to wonder about the costs associated with doing things of this nature – after all, some of these suggestions can really add up!

The truth is that most of them are very economical. Shirts cost on the order of US\$10–40 each – the former being a nice t-shirt, and the latter being a very nice button-down or rugby shirt. Dinner or lunch usually costs at most \$25–30 per person, and if it's from a takeout place, it usually only costs about \$10. Silly toys are usually \$5–15 each. (I highly recommend Nerf weaponry – a great toy as well as excellent stress relief.) Even a cleaning service or pet care is usually no more than \$20–50 a day. Of course a weekend getaway can be several hundred dollars, but it's up to you to determine what is appropriate and within your budget.

If you're still concerned about the costs, consider what you are getting in return. In most cases, we are talking about situations where people are doing more than they really need to in order to get their jobs done. It's a cold-steel way of thinking about

this, but the truth is that the cost associated with you giving them a little something in appreciation is nothing compared to the costs in labor and delayed completion of tasks that would be the result if the employees were not essentially giving you their extra time free of charge.

Even when there is no obvious “justification” for such gifts, they go a long way in making employees feel welcome and appreciated, which of course makes them happy and contented in their jobs.

## Conclusion

Clearly there is a lot to do when trying to keep a team happy and together. I have only addressed some of the main points. There are a great many more that could be addressed, and a significant amount of detail that could be put into each. I hope, however, that these will help you get started on the road to significant employee happiness and retention.

Now take the list of principles that you created after reading my last article and attempt to update it with some of the things you would like to work on from this one. Take a moment to review your progress so far and think about how much you have or have not improved in the time that has passed.

Here's the tough part. What I really would like you to do is schedule some time to sit down with your human resources partner to review the list together. Discuss your feelings with the person and see what they think of your ideas and how you might better proceed in achieving your goals. Don't worry, though – they are there to help you and will likely be very pleased to know that you are even thinking about this.

Lastly, if you happen to come up with anything that you think works better than some of the things I have suggested, or perhaps you feel I have missed a principle that you feel is critical, please send me email and let me know. If I get enough of these, I will write a follow-up article and may include a synopsis of your findings in it.

If you happen to be in the tech industry, let's have a contest. I'm trying to see if I can keep no fewer than one-half of my staff for no less than three years. That's quite a challenge – do you think you're up to it? Drop me a line and let me know how you fare. Good luck!