The Smooth-running Workplace: Let employees like their work

Can’t keep good employees? Or any employees, for that matter? Do the ones who stay seem to hate walking into work? You’re not alone.

And most businesses have no idea why their employees grumble and employee turnover is high. Replacing employees is expensive. Replacing a key employee can seem impossible.

Why do they leave? Why do so many who stay hate their jobs and perform no better than they must? Gregory P. Smith, President of Chart Your Course International, says these five reasons are the most frequently cited for leaving:

- Weak relationships with coworkers and supervisors
- Wrong job
- Unsuitable business climate and culture
- Pay not connected to performance
- No opportunity to improve skills or advance

No, you can’t eliminate all of these forever. Usually, however, you can change these and other elements of negative work environments that make employees dread coming to work.

Remove things that get in the way of employees liking their work, and you will create a smooth-running workplace. That will do more to keep your good employees than the salaries and benefits that got them to apply for the job.

Different personalities, however, like different things in their work environments. So be prepared to have some flexibility. But many aspects of work define a positive or negative environment no matter what the job is. To find, hire, and keep the best people, consider the following suggestions to create a positive work environment and make your workplace run smoothly.

Focus on individuals: Manage one employee at a time. Everyone has a unique and changing set of needs and desires about their jobs. Create individual profiles to know each employee's expectations, motivations, goals, and keys for job satisfaction. Start with the positions that have the most impact on productivity, but include as many employees as you can.

Focus on the family: One small company gives their employees' children a $50 Savings Bond twice a year when they get straight A's on their report cards. A survey of 1,000 companies showed that half of them let workers stay home when children are ill without using vacation or sick days. Two-thirds of companies allow employees to use flexible scheduling to adjust work hours daily—flextime. These are examples of companies recognizing the importance of family to the employee and helping balance an employee’s family responsibility with job responsibility.

Balance of work and personal Life: Most employees expect a certain balance between work and personal life even beyond allowing for family responsibilities. They have interests outside work and
feel that work should not keep them from participating in other pursuits. Assure your employees that you understand their commitments to a life outside work. Let them know that you will help them coordinate work with their personal lives, but also that you still expect a high standard of job performance.

You gain the primary balance between work and personal life in the work schedule. Employees need both flexibility and stability in the schedule. Seems like conflicting demands, doesn’t it? But it’s not.

You should be flexible, if you can, when the employee needs a change in the schedule to meet some outside obligation. For example, the employee requests ahead of time that you change the schedule so that she has a certain day off or works a certain shift on a certain day. For another example, after the schedule is set, the employee has a sudden obligation or opportunity and contacts another employee to switch days or hours. In this case the employees have the obligation to make sure they don’t put you in an overtime situation.

For schedule stability, create a schedule that tells employees ahead of time what days and hours they will usually work. They should not have to wait every week until you post the schedule Friday to know whether they will work Sunday and which shift they will work. Perhaps the business does not allow perfect stability, but you should do what you can if only to assure employees that they will usually have, for example, a certain day or a certain evening off each week.

Vacation scheduling is often important to employees for both family and personal obligations. They may want to have certain weeks or holidays off during the year. Develop a system for scheduling those times off. If everyone would love to have the Fourth of July week off but the business has to be open, your employees will understand. But the system must be logical and fair within its logic.

It might be strictly by seniority of years—the employee who has been with the company longest gets first choice. It might be by seniority of position, but many employees will resent this if you always get the best weeks. You might simply have the employees work it out among themselves with certain rules about coverage.

**Hold supervisors accountable:** Incompetent supervisors drive more employees to resigning than any other single thing. You can have employees periodically rate their supervisors. When you find one who does not handle people well, either work with him to improve his people skills or remove him from that job.

If your company is really small, this poorly performing supervisor is you. In that case you can work on your skills, hire a supervisor to deal with the employees, or sell the business. (Don’t even think about firing all the employees and hiring new ones.)

Make it part of the supervisors’ job to keep turnover low. Help them: educate them about the things that detract from and add to job satisfaction. In larger businesses set specific employee-retention responsibilities for Human Resources, supervisors, and executives. You can set retention goals for managers and penalize them when they lose too many.

(But don’t overdo this. Don’t penalize a manager who improves business by hiring good people he knows will not last long or by firing people who are a detriment to the business. Penalties in such cases will make managers leave positions open and leave poor workers in place, hurting your business even more. Sometimes the manager is not directly at fault for turnover. For example if at some point you
simply have to hire three warm bodies to fill out your sales floor, the supervisor may have to fire one for incompetence, another may leave for a more suitable job, and the third may go back to school. So while it’s a good idea to hold supervisors accountable for turnover, you should also review each case to decide whether it is a retention problem.)

**Communicate:** You must have open, honest, respectful communications between management and employees. Without it, distrust grows in both camps.

Never talk down to employees with condescending language or tone. And don’t shout or endlessly repeat warnings and instructions. If you think you must shout or repeat incessantly, try building your communication strategy from scratch.

Neither should you tolerate disrespectful communication from employees. Allowing this once will only encourage more of it, and that will eventually erode cooperation between you and your employees.

Share information and strategic direction with your employees and listen to their ideas about the subject, whatever it is. Often you must sell your idea to your staff to get them to buy into the changes you want. If you cannot construct a cogent explanation for them, perhaps your idea needs some reconsideration. If an employee comes up with a better alternative plan or with a good modification to your plan, incorporate it and give the employee full credit.

**Education (allow employees to learn):** This is a broad area. It includes teaching a new employee to become a productive member of the team, training employees to do new tasks or to do jobs better or by new methods, providing different career paths, and fostering career growth in the company.

**Shepherd new employees:** Make sure new employees get the training and support they need. Assign mentors for their first 90 days on the job—often the probation period for new employees. Employees who become unhappy in that time may consider the job a mistake and not worth the effort to tough it out. Don’t make things tough for them; have the mentors pave their way to become good, satisfied employees.

The mentor is to shepherd the new employee—to be the guide and confidant and to be a buffer between the newbie and the supervisor. The new employee can ask the shepherd any question about the job, coworkers, the supervisor, or the company without suffering a penalty. He or she may ask the same question a dozen times, and the shepherd should answer completely and patiently each time.

The shepherd makes sure that the newbie gets all the training needed, whether in the classroom, self-study, on the computer, or on the job. The shepherd reviews progress with this probationer every day at first. This should taper off to weekly or biweekly reviews by the end of 90 days.

During this period, the supervisor should give the new employee occasional feedback based on his or her observations and reports from the shepherd. With a successful new employee, the shepherd will probably only make occasional observations and have quick reviews by the last 30 or 60 days of the probation period.

One critical skill the shepherd must have is the willingness and ability to praise. Praise is crucial to building and reinforcing the new employee’s confidence and motivation. Praises for doing the job well should outnumber the corrections given to do the job better or differently.
Hardly ever should the shepherd chastise the newbie harshly, and never in front of other employees. Assume that the new employee wants to do the job well and has simply made a serious error or has become frustrated for some reason. The shepherd must remain calm, find out what happened and why, and get the new employee back on track.

A new employee who must be chastised or corrected more than praised is one who is obviously not going to make it past 90 days. And, as soon as it’s obvious, fire that employee to allow him and your business to move on.

**Training:** Many small businesses have no training budget. The internet allows education and training companies to provide low-cost alternatives to costly in-house training. Look for such training in your industry. And consider using those company-mandated monthly or quarterly meetings for training. Have an employee with a special skill or idea share with coworkers if you don’t have other training tools for those opportunities.

**Learning opportunities:** For many people, learning new skills is as important as the money they make. Usually a new skill makes the employee more valuable to the business. Sometimes these skills lead to new career paths. Often the new path is parallel to other paths an employee might take, but one might use the particular skills or interests of an employee while another does not. Promote ongoing, two-way communication between employees and their supervisors regarding career progress and alternate paths.

**Career Growth:** Some career paths may have the potential for professional or career growth. This growth comes from increased responsibility and prestige and usually with higher pay or other incentives. Opportunities for advancement will help retain employees.

**Structure vs. Independence:** Some employees thrive in tightly defined and structured jobs—lots of work, few decisions. Giving some workers only specific timelines, procedures, or guidelines is what they need when completing a project or problem-solving. Others like less structure but still want to know that people or resources are available to guide them if needed.

Others, however, expect to work independently. They want to set their own priorities and to use their methods of problem-solving. Allowing them to take on new tasks or to change the way they do their job helps keep these employees happy.

Some workers like the challenge of being under time or monetary constraints. Others love to build teams with other workers to tackle assignments. Try to understand what kinds of structure and what kinds of independence make your key employees tick. Then apply those needs in the best ways to make them work for you.

**Performance appraisal:** Every business can profit from a formal performance-review program. But these appraisal programs can do great harm to the relationship with employees if they are not done well. Consider these things about your performance appraisal program.

**Give ongoing feedback:** Don’t wait for the formal performance-appraisal review meeting to give feedback to the employee. Give feedback every day. Not on everything every day—who’s got time for that? But be willing to give feedback on appropriate points any day of any week.
Some feedback is simply on-the-job education. For example if the produce clerk doesn’t stack bananas the way you want him to, tell him and show him just how you want them stacked. When, three days later, you see him stacking them incorrectly, remind him of the correct way and tell him to restack them. If he’s a new employee and is doing well in other aspects of his job, you’ll probably tell him that it’s okay that he forgot what you told him three days ago because you know he’s got a lot to learn. But when he makes the same mistake the next week, you’ve moved from on-the-job training to on-the-spot appraisal. Now it’s time to tell him that you expect him to remember something so basic and simple after being instructed a couple of times.

This is a simplistic example, but the principle applies to practically all cases of poor performance. Employers must teach new employees how to do the work, remind them without penalty while they are honing their skills, and tell them when they do not meet expectations. Then they have no doubt that they did not do that task well. They can focus on improving their performance. And you will not surprise them when you list that example of poor performance in the performance appraisal.

Without ongoing feedback the employee will be listening in shock at the examples of poor performance brought up in the review. At best he will feel victimized and wonder why you did not say something sooner so that he could correct it.

Make a habit of telling employees if they’ve done a good job or a poor job. If a poor job, let them know how to do it better. Tell them every day if possible, but at least once a week, even if only in passing.

**Praise good work:** This is an emphatic point within the topic of giving ongoing feedback. People want good pay, but also want your praises, whatever their job. Supervisors should tell workers when they have done a good job and that it is appreciated—even when the employee has done no more than you expect.

Even the barely-meets-requirements worker needs praise, maybe more than the good worker. Almost every one of them will respond favorably to a little daily appreciation—even if the praise is only for showing up on time. Praise exceptional workers for their exceptional work, even when they seem embarrassed by praise.

Create some formal ways to recognize good employees, such as peer-recognition awards, posting employee-of-the-month pictures, or top-employee parking spaces. Tell the other employees how that employee won the award so that you might inspire them to better work. Find creative ways to make people feel good about their job.

Peer recognition allows people to reward each other for doing a good job. It works because employees are in the best position to see their coworkers doing the right things. Some companies mount pictures of their employees on a wall. Others post pictures of employees who have worked there a certain length of time or who have ever been employee of the month.

**Keep notes through the evaluation period:** Do this so that you don’t overemphasize recent performance. You cannot remember all the points of good and poor performance for even a single employee for six months or a year. Make a note even if you give verbal feedback when the event happened. Don’t wait until the end of the week to make notes about employee performance. You’ll forget something. Jot it down soon after it happens.

**Don’t overemphasize the positive or the negative:** Some supervisors are uncomfortable giving negative feedback. Others seem to choke on words of praise. Employees need the truth about their
work, and the truth about work performance usually contains both good and bad things.

If you underplay the negative, the employee is likely to keep doing those things poorly. He’s also likely to wonder why he got such a poor raise when you didn’t have much negative to say about the way he stacked bananas. You will also be missing the chance to tell him how to improve his work.

If you say nothing positive about his work, he’ll leave the meeting wondering if he should look for a job where he can contribute something positive. He may also wonder what kind of fool you are to give him a raise if all you seem to remember is how poorly he used to stack bananas.

**Develop plans to improve performance:** Work with employees to improve performance during the performance-review meeting. That can be the most valuable use of the meeting. You can simply tell employees how to improve their work in some simple, straightforward tasks such as, say, stacking bananas. Or you can work with the employee to understand what is keeping him from doing the task well and how to overcome that obstacle—for example, if she is shy about speaking to customers, maybe joining a Toastmasters club will give her the practice and confidence she needs.

**Listen:** Listen at least as much as you talk during the performance appraisal. Listen to the employees’ explanations of why they did not perform well. Often they will move from explaining why they did not do well right into how they can improve their performance. They may have found their own solution to their problem, or the two of you may have the beginning of a solution you can work on together.

Listening to the employee also makes it easier to set goals for the next appraisal period. These goals should be a mutual agreement, and you must consider the employee’s view to get commitment from him or her.

**Enhance connections between people:** Frankly, it’s nearly impossible to develop programs that make mismatched employees become friends, make employees respect their supervisors, and make employees love the company. But you can do things that lower the barriers to some of these things.

Small-scale, company-sponsored and paid-for events, even a night of bowling and pizza, can get employees together, with or without the supervisor. You might even consider, for instance, paying the bartender in advance for a round of drinks where all or most of your employees gather at the watering hole every Friday after work. Then you won’t intrude on their wind-down-from-work time. Be aware of whether all the employees appreciate the event you choose. Do something else for the ones who don’t participate.

Executive roundtables, where you invite employees for a meal and conversation with a company executive, can allow employees to see corporate management as human and willing to listen to employees. Do this only with executives who can truly mix with employees, or you could lose ground in the connections game.

Creating teams on the job can create bonds between workers and can lower stress by sharing responsibilities among workers. Teams can be long-standing or only for a short-term project. Teams can also be a good way to spread knowledge to more employees.

Don’t, however, assign an employee to a team if you know he has a deep-seated conflict with another
team member. Don’t look for either trouble or miracles.

**Measure employee attitudes:** Employee assessments of the job, management, and workplace can measure the attitudes and feelings of workers. Every organization should conduct some form of worker-attitude assessment periodically during the year.

Usually this is a survey asking questions about how the employee views the company, the workplace, the job, the immediate supervisor, and other managers they see often. If you’re inclined to construct a survey yourself, do plenty of research. I suggest that you find a company to provide your survey and perhaps to conduct it and help you interpret the results.

Share the results with employees and use them to modify company policies. Most importantly the immediate supervisors can use the information to modify their interactions with the employees.

**Hire the best:** Finally, armed with this bit of advice about how to keep them, hire the best people you can find. Depending on your business, this can mean many things. It certainly doesn’t mean the same thing to a firm hiring chemical engineers as it does to the convenience store on the corner. Their flexibility for wages, work hours, days off, and work environment are considerably different. The sets of people who will apply to each business bear almost no resemblance to each other. But within the constraints of your business—and sometimes creatively stretching those constraints—do your darnedest to hire people who are likely to like the work and to do it well.

**Sources and inspiration** for this article come from the following:

- Coreexcel: Visit them at [www.corexcel.com](http://www.corexcel.com).
- Jim Blasingame and The Small Business Advocate Newsletter: Visit them at [SmallBusinessAdvocate.com](http://SmallBusinessAdvocate.com).
- Janet Attard: Visit her at [www.businessknowhow.com](http://www.businessknowhow.com).

Also look under “publications” at the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development website, [www.deed.state.mn](http://www.deed.state.mn), for a copy of *An Employer’s Guide to Employee Handbooks in Minnesota*. For additional advice about hiring, go to [www.sba.gov](http://www.sba.gov) and select “managing your business” and “managing employees.” Also go to [www.score.org](http://www.score.org) and select “learning center” and “human resources.” Or make an appointment with a SCORE counselor on this site.