

Best Practices in Emergency Services

EMS, FIRE RESCUE, DISASTER MANAGEMENT INFORMATION SINCE 1998
<http://www.emergencybestpractices.com>

Get a Fix on Employee Satisfaction to Reduce Turnover

June 2007

By Mike Taigman

In 1965, the Rolling Stones bumped Sonny and Cher's "I Got You Babe" off the top of the charts with a song that became the Stones' biggest hit, "(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction." A generation of Americans made this their theme song as they searched for life's meaning. How satisfied are you with your work, your job, your boss and your organization? How happy are the folks on your team? Can you get any satisfaction?

Most of the fire and EMS leaders with whom I work will say that their employees are their valuable resource. Certainly, they are the most expensive. Look at the budget for most organizations in our line of work, and you'll find that 70 to 80 percent goes toward wages, benefits, training, recruiting and other employee-related expenses. Yet most of these same organizations know more about their ambulances and rescue squads than they do about their employees.

What's your employee turnover rate? Maybe the paramedic shortage that we keep hearing about is really a failure of organizations to retain employees. Do you know how much it costs your organization to replace an employee who resigns?

Most HR experts will tell you that it costs between 100 and 150 percent of an employee's annual salary to replace someone who leaves. That means, if an emergency services organization has 100 employees with an average annual salary of \$35,000 and 10 percent turnover each year, its annual turnover cost would be about \$525,000 a year. Wouldn't you prefer to save this money, or spend it on vehicles or equipment?

Why do employees leave organizations? Two Gallup Organization consultants, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman, summarized 25 years worth of research involving more than 80,000 interviews with employees in all kinds of organizations in their book, *First, Break All the Rules*.

Their research found that employees don't leave their organizations; they leave their immediate supervisors. These researchers also identified a handful of questions the answers to which can predict which employees are likely to leave, such as, "Is there someone at work who cares about me as a person?"

There are some key issues that need to be addressed if you're going to successfully head down the employee satisfaction improvement path.

First, employees need to be able to honestly and completely share how they feel without fear of negative consequences. There are many tools for getting employee feedback including interviews, surveys, a suggestion box, etc.

What questions should you ask? You'll ask better questions if you involve some of the employees who will be answering the questions in their creation. We have set up a sample employee satisfaction survey that you can take at www.surveymonkey.com/s.asp?u=730833460901.

Once you've agreed on a set of questions, it is time to select a mechanism or two for getting them answered. Supervisors can interview employees one-on-one, ask questions to groups of employees during meetings, send written surveys in the mail, or e-mail employees a link to a Web-based survey. Giving people the option of providing their name or giving their feedback anonymously seems to be the best option.

Listening to Feedback

There is an interesting dynamic that occurs with every leadership team as they read feedback from employee satisfaction surveys: Leaders question the validity of the survey tool, even if they designed it. They say that they need more information. They explain away feedback that they don't like. This defensive response seems universal, predictable, and there may be a bit of reality in the comments.

Leaders who can recognize their defensive reactions, set their biases aside, take a deep breath, and really listen with an open mind will win the respect of their employees. Be sure to provide a summary of the survey results to the employees who

participated. This step lets people know that they have been heard.

With your team, decide what your organization can address right away; which issues will take more time, money, and/or hard work than you currently have; and which things that you are just going to have to live with. Make specific commitments for action.

Leaders must work together with employees to take action on what they have learned. The sad truth is that 90 percent of organizations that take employee satisfaction surveys don't do anything with the results. If you are not 100 percent committed to taking action on what your employees tell you, don't bother asking them. To be asked and ignored is much worse than not being asked at all.

The cycle of asking, answering, listening, taking action for improvement and assessing the impact of improvements must be repeated regularly and ingrained in the organizational culture.

Employee satisfaction is a moving target. More than 40 years after Keith Richards and Mick Jagger wrote their hit song, too many people working in fire and EMS are still singing, "I can't get no, I can't get no, I can't get no satisfaction." Are you listening?

Copyright © 2008 EMS Best Practices, Inc. All rights reserved.