

Motivating Chatham County's low-paid workers

By Jeff Davidson

Enrique is 21 years old. He came to this country when he was 16, and didn't graduate from high school. Although he is a U.S. citizen, he only has a so-so grasp of English. Enrique works on a construction crew repairing country roads. He is a good worker, is seldom late, and hardly ever complains. You can feel it though: he is not going to be on the job very long. He will pick up a few dollars and then move on — to where, who knows.

Is it possible to increase the job length of stay for workers like Enrique? Indeed, can you motivate someone who, quite bluntly, toils for long hours for little reward? The answer is yes. It will require a little effort and ingenuity; still, after all is said and done, Enrique and others in his situation may still depart on short or no notice. The odds that they will remain with the job longer, however, will increase by following some of these guidelines for motivating transient employees.

1. Check Your Attitude

As human beings we broadcast messages all the time. What are you broadcasting to your crews? That they are replaceable? That you are not concerned with their needs?

It's easy for a Chatham County road crew supervisor who has watched dozens of laborers come and go to develop the view that, "It's the nature of this kind of work, why fight it?" It is that attitude that partially perpetuates the massive turnover. Resolve that you can take measures to increase the average longevity of low-paid laborers, and that your attitude and initiative do make a difference.

2. An Encouraging Word

How long would it take you to learn some key phrases in Korean, Vietnamese, Spanish, or Farsi? It doesn't take long to master some short conversational pleasantries. Many book-

stores are stocked with dictionaries providing various language translations. The Web can offer you answers in seconds. Even easier, sit down with one of your key crew members. On a paper jot down the phonetic spelling of phrases such as "How are you," and "You're doing a good job."

3. Unannounced Breaks

Periodically throughout the day, and particularly on challenging days, give your workers unannounced breaks. Augment these mini vacations by distributing snacks. The few dollars you may spend will pay off in terms of greater productivity that day. These breaks will also enhance longevity among low-paid crew members. It pays to offer little perks.

4. Rotating Leadership

Rotate leadership among some crews. For instance, on four consecutive days, make sure that crew members each have one day as "foreman." For some of your workers, this may represent their first taste of leadership. Rotating leadership is most effective when the crew members are unfamiliar with each other.

5. Awards System

Make "contests" short in duration and high on visuals. For example, you could keep a chart on the wall or other visible location indicating who has had the most consecutive days without being absent or tardy. Which crew performances have prompted words of praise from customers? Who has gone above and beyond the call of duty in the last week?

You can easily chart and share these achievements with crew members. People like to see their names on a chart followed by stars or other performance indicators. The chart could be language proof, for instance. Everyone recognizes their own name in English, and stars or dollar signs can

indicate the bonuses you'll offer. After posting the charts, set up a simple system of rewards, which could include cash or more time as a team leader.

6. Develop Mentors

Look for leaders among your crew members who can serve as mentors to newly hired staff. This alleviates having to break in each crew member. Those individuals selected as mentors will be pleased with this special status and will not only assist in achieving smoother operations but will help alleviate quick departures among new employees.

7. Use a Checklist

Here's a checklist to help you determine if you are raising or lowering morale, increasing or decreasing crew members' length of stay, and serving as a leader, not just as a manager:

- Do I make sure employees understand how to properly complete a job?
- Have I clearly indicated what results I expect?
- Do I offer adequate and ongoing support?
- Do I cultivate positive relationships?
- Do I show concern for crew members as individuals?
- Have I established appropriate recognition and reward systems?
- Do I take the time to learn and to dispense encouraging phrases for enhanced communication?

Even if you practice all of the above recommendations, you still will not eliminate quick turnover or enhance crew motivation. Yet, if you can induce the transient crew member to stay on an extra week or encourage crew members to finish a big job on time, then you have made your job a little easier and have contributed to the long-term viability of your company, Chatham County, or wherever you happen to work.

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