Retaining New Public Servants

By: Jonathan Fisk

Robert F. Kennedy, in 1966 said, "Few will have the greatness to bend history itself; but each of us can work to change a small portion of events, and in the total of all those acts will be written the history of this generation."[1] Although Kennedy was not speaking about public servants, his observations are still applicable. Individually, public servants leave a small imprint on history; their collective impact is the foundation of government power. Their decisions range from mundane to extraordinary and from rational to irrational. During a typical morning, a city manager, for example, will arrive at his or her workplace and may post information on a Listserv. During that same day, he or she might submit to his or her governing body a multimillion-dollar infrastructure plan. Later that day, the manager may hire the fire chief whose department saves a resident's life. Despite the myriad opportunities to help "bend history," public sector employers are in crisis. Public service organizations are competing with each other and the private sector to keep talent.

The Changing Workforce

Historically, public sector employees viewed career development as a linear process. Their "employment contract" included pension programs and civil service levels. Such conditions of employment led to predictable and stable career pathways. Workers entered the workforce as young employees so that they could learn skills necessary to be successful as government employees. As they grew older (30s and 40s), their skills developed, and, as a result, they sought to "maintain" their careers. Finally, they retired when they reached their mid to late 50s.[2] The "employment contract" strengthens and reinforces itself over time, which creates an inverse relationship between length of service and turnover rates. Thus, as the "time served" increases, the likelihood of turnover decreases.

Younger workers, however, have shortened the traditional workplace timeline. Their expectations follow a similar pattern, but transpire over approximately two years, rather than two or three decades. Many of these workers leave before they have an opportunity to rise in organizational hierarchy, demonstrate full worth to the organization, or establish strong ties to the community.[3] Therefore, as a group, younger workers are more mobile, are less connected to their community, and do not have as much organizational loyalty as their older colleagues. Moreover, they consider retirement as "self-driven investment opportunities." Simply put, in today's workplace, the lure of government pension and job security is not enough to retain quality employees.[4]

Attitudes regarding work and career are generational. A 1960s survey asked what gave life the most meaning. 13% believed leisure, 33% answered work, and 45% responded with family. Thirty years later, the same question revealed drastically different results: 27% leisure, 17% work, and 41% family. This trend has continued into the 2000s.[5] In response, public employers should consider modifying the existing "employment contract" so that it reflects the attitudes of a changing workforce.

Members of the academic community are split regarding the role that generational differences play in performance and employer-employee expectations. Some scholars argue that individual attitudes are relatively stable and differences are based more on perception than reality. Others suggest that individual motivations have changed. Perhaps the safest conclusion one can draw is that the dynamic between job expectations and "generation" needs further study.

Nonetheless, even if an employee's performance stays consistent, the value placed on a particular benefit will change depending on his or her external circumstances.[6] And, as such, job satisfaction and turnover intention will be impacted by these circumstances. Turnover intentions are important because, if an employee intends to leave and has the opportunity to leave, he or she will likely do so.[7] Such decisions impact the entire organization. Employees nearing retirement, for example, are generally more concerned about their pensions and post-employment security. Because of these concerns, they may often delay retirement. Since they are retiring later, opportunities for advancement and additional responsibility, especially for younger workers, are forestalled. As a consequence, younger workers perceive a lack of upward movement and seek opportunities elsewhere.

Members of Generation X and Y are joining and changing the public sector. Understanding their expectations is necessary if the employment contract is going to be successfully modified.

Members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) expect that they will be given opportunities to seek personal and professional growth, and the flexibility to pursue a balance between work and life away from work. Additionally, they generally value recognition and opportunities to work in teams. Generation Y (1976-1995 or 1982–2001, depending on the source) seek opportunities that enable them to perform meaningful work. They also expect employers to allow time for professional growth and to find a balance between work and family.[8] When developing retention programs, organizations should focus on the employee expectations and job satisfaction because both are consistent predictors of turnover intentions.[9]

Expectancy Theory and Expectations

What motivates public sector workers to stay at their current job and not look for others? To begin answering this question, some philosophical observations relative to decision making and motivation may be helpful. Picture a spectrum. At one end is pure passion, and on the other end is pure reason. David Hume, a Scottish philosopher, argued that reason analyzes and interprets the information that we use in decision formulation and execution. Reason, however, cannot by itself inspire action.[10] He therefore concluded that decision-making is a function of an individual's passions and reasoning. Applying Hume's observations, an employee will be content in his or her current occupation if it satisfies needs as identified through their "reasoning" and values as determined by their "passions." Conversely, rational choice theorists argue that decisions are products of rational calculations. The individual approaches a decision by assessing the probability of specific consequences, the expected utility, and alignment between reward and work. A "rational choice" employee would remain at their current employer as long they could rationally calculate the benefit of staying as outweighing the costs.

Decisions are reached after consideration is given to an expectation of rewards, the context in which decisions are made, and the passions of the decision-maker. Expectancy theory, which attempts to understand human decision-making, is often a strong predictor of employee satisfaction and turnover intention. Specifically, expectancy theorists argue that motivation is a balance between want and work, or rewards and expectations. Individuals make both rational and irrational judgments based on an effort-reward probability calculation and align their work performance accordingly. The theory explains why some employees have high job satisfaction with lower turnover intention, average satisfaction with average intention, and low satisfaction with higher turnover intention.

Consider the following scenario, in which three employees are responsible for preparing an annual budget for a public organization. In order to expedite its completion, the organization established a bonus system. Employee A concluded that the bonus (the reward) for completing the budget early is worth the greater effort. As such, Employee A works hard to accomplish the task and is generally satisfied. Also consider Employee B, a recent MPA graduate interested in human resource management and not budget preparation. He or she does not value the bonus as worth the extra work. It follows then that Employee B will likely do only the minimum work required and will work slower than Employee A. If this scenario should reoccur with regularity, he or she will likely have average to high turnover intention and might begin looking at other employment opportunities. Finally, Employee C does not connect the bonus with the work. His or her performance is likely average. The following table summarizes the scenario discussed above.

Employee	Reward Alignment	Performance	Satisfaction	Turnover Intention
A	Strong	Strong	High	Low
B	Average	Mediocre	Medium-Low	Medium-High
C	None	Mediocre	Low	High

In order to be successful, expectancy theorists argue that management must create incentive programs that align want and reward. They explain that job satisfaction is linked to this alignment. In the case described above, employees embodied different values and came to the workplace from different life circumstances. As a consequence, they viewed the reward structure differently. Employee A "perceive[d] the exchange to be a balanced one, when [he or she] are getting what it is [he or she] want from the

organization, and can then focus [his or her] energies on achieving the organization's goals, as, in turn, this will satisfy [his or her] personal ones." The other two (B and C) employees did not find a balance between reward and work and were motivated "to attend to that inequity at the expense of being motivated toward a particular organizational objective." The scenario above suggests that employee performance may be positive, neutral, or negative, and it is related to the connection between employee expectation of being rewarded and the perceived value of those rewards. Additionally, it attempts to illustrate that no single formula or principle exists that can isolate specific motivations and predict behavior.[11]

In order to offer incentives that maximize work-want alignment, human resource managers need information relative to employee needs and expectations. To acquire the best information, managers should study and anticipate what employees want from their jobs and then consider those findings in the context of available incentives. They should determine if there is a misalignment between reward and work. If a misalignment exists, managers can reappraise the value placed on the work and the reward from both organizational and individual perspectives. Such an examination may reveal significant obstacles and deficiencies that adversely affect employee retention.[12] This is especially important as public organizations compete with one another and with the private sector to attract and keep quality employees.

Again, individuals enter into employment with varying needs and wants. Some employees, for example, value a monetary bonus more than a flexible work schedule. Others might accept less pay in order to receive assistance with childcare. Some employees will find greater satisfaction in working independently than as a member of a team. Acquiring this type of information from employees is critical to the success of any retention program. In addition, if employees perceive an imbalance between rewards and work effort, the likelihood of insubordination, poor performance, absenteeism, turnover, and lower productivity increases. Conversely, when they perceive equilibrium between work and reward, organizational effectiveness, higher retention, and satisfaction tend to increase.[13]

Retention Realities and Options

Retention is a measure of the strength of the organization's "contract" with each employee. The contract begins during the applicant's recruitment. It involves obligations and commitments from both. Organizations should recruit individuals who intend to stay with the organization for a considerable length of time. They should target applicants who support the organization's values and who are committed to professional development and the organization's continuing improvement and progress.[14] In response, employees must trust the employer to follow through with incentives and opportunities (education, flexibility, professional development) that were offered during recruitment. They must sense that the employer offers them something unique that may not be found elsewhere. The formation of these beliefs is particularly important during the employee's first three months of tenure.

Because each employee comes to the workplace in unique circumstances, a "cafeteria-style approach to incentives" that appeals both to intrinsic and extrinsic needs is advisable. Providing a variety of options increases the chance that differences in circumstance, attitudes, and values are accommodated. Such an approach might include traditional benefits such as additional time off, extra pay, and additional team-building activities. It behooves employers to understand that a majority of employees who look for opportunities to improve and broaden their skills to undertake tasks and assume responsibilities of greater importance will expect to receive meaningful feedback.[15] Although it is important to offer an array of incentives, there are some incentives to which younger employees are particularly responsive. These might include: new challenges and opportunities to do meaningful work, daycare assistance or reimbursement, education, flexible scheduling, or tele-work.[16]

Many members of Generations X and Y are lifelong learners. As they enter the public workforce, the availability of training and continuing education, as a retention device, is increasingly important. Progressive employers offer their employees training through seminars, webinars, conferences, tuition reimbursement, and other types of continuing education. Employers located in communities with large Hispanic populations, for example, might offer their employees language development skills.

Many younger employees embrace working with senior level staff. As such, organizations that facilitate these relationships increase the likelihood of higher retention rates. Senior staff may also offer young professionals job coaching, mentoring, and other career-development services. These programs should be dedicated to promoting career advancement and progression of younger workers. A 1999 study, for instance, showed that 81% of *Fortune 100 Best Companies to Work For* offered career-development programs. Younger generations want executive level staff to help them set realistic goals, create and enforce deadlines, provide feedback (positive and negative), and re-evaluate as appropriate.[17] Finally, senior level staff also might work part time or assist younger employees through co-directing or job sharing.[18]

Younger workers are also interested in achieving a work/life balance. If work and life are imbalanced, research indicates employees feel an increased level of stress and anxiety, lower life and job satisfaction, and higher turnover intention.[19] When employees perceive a balance between their work and family obligations, researchers found that they are less stressed, feel more control and meaning to their work, experience more satisfying professional and personal lives, and are less likely to harbor turnover intentions.[20] Again, referring to the best 100 companies to work for, 87% offered some type of alternative scheduling.[21]

The most effective incentives are those designed for a specific individual and as such, may require his or her input. Tailoring the inducement increases the strength of the incentive, thereby leading to better retention. Moreover, such tailoring reduces costs by eliminating unnecessary programs.[22] In other words, employee retention may be improved by a combination of incentives that appeal to an employee's unique set of intrinsic and extrinsic motives. In this regard, solely increasing pay is, at best, a short-term solution.[23]

Inevitably, quality employees leave. Because of this reality, public sector employers should anticipate these vacancies and take steps to manage existing talent better. Many organizations, for example, are implementing talent-management plans that prepare individuals for executive and leadership roles in the organization. Talent management can counter the feelings of stagnation many younger workers experience, as it can help create an atmosphere of progress and opportunity.[24]

Marnie Green, who facilitates courses in Human Relations and Organizational Behavior, Human Resource Management, Public Speaking, and Legal Issues at the University of Phoenix and the University of Phoenix Online, identifies six elements of successful talent management: aligning strategy with mission, top management support, middle or line managers buy-in, performance measuring, organizational development, and incentives. An organization's leadership must also value employee development and to that end, endorse and actively support training and educational programming, so as to build skills and retain talent. Middle management must be directed to allow front-line employees to seek educational opportunities and be held accountable for the professional development of their staff. A city, for example, could conduct second language training or cross train employees in other departments. Finally, in order to measure development, management must conduct talent audits and reviews.[25] These factors must work in tandem so that program effectiveness can be maximized.

Talent Retention Tips

1. Design benefits that reflect the values of younger workers.

2. Initiate job rotation and assignments, especially for long-term employees and new employees who desire such.

3. Offer additional training and coaching for certain "rising stars."

4. Provide flexible scheduling and embrace programming that ensures work/life balance.

5. Encourage employees to develop their own career-development plans with the support of a career coach and manager.

6. Offer meaningful job-performance feedback and support.

7. Develop and "grow" co-managers in critical functions so as to minimize the organizational impact of retiring employees.

8. Develop in-house or contract out "assessment centers" that assist employers in identifying its employees' strengths and weaknesses. It can also help organizations identify talent in an objective way.

9. Consider extending special retention efforts during the first three months of employment.

10. Work with employees to establish and identify personalized incentives.

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