

Good workers are worth keeping! Ideas that can help



Do your good workers get the attention they deserve?

- The Australian Meat Industry is battling skill shortages; recruitment issues impacted by low unemployment and an ageing workforce; compounded by escalating turnover rates that severely impact on the bottom line.
- Many plants feel they are in crisis mode. Some react to that by continually seeking new people. Others put a lot of effort into managing people who are underperforming.
- Those employees who have been around for awhile and 'get on with the job' don't attract attention. Everyone assumes these people know they are doing a good job.
- They don't.

Why should you focus on good workers?

- Research shows that one of the most important things missing from people's working lives is feedback on how well they're doing.
- Whether their performance is good or poor, most people identify feedback as one of the things they most value.
- Yet, your best workers may not know that they're so good.
- Your middle-of-the road workers may not know exactly where they could improve.
- Even your non-performers—although they're certain to know the Supervisor's not happy with them for missing days, turning up late and generally goofing off—may not know which parts of their job they're actually doing well.
- The danger is in letting the underperformers (who are usually a small percentage of the workforce) take up the majority of the Supervisor's time—and the majority of your attention (during disciplinary consultations).
- Good workers deserve attention too, to keep them that way—and to keep them with you!

Research has shown people stay longer and perform better when they feel valued!

You use a 'prevention' rather than a 'cure' approach in other parts of the business...

...yet 'good employees', who are your most valuable resource, are often overlooked!

Good pay and bonuses are good rewards—but they just don't always cut it on their own...

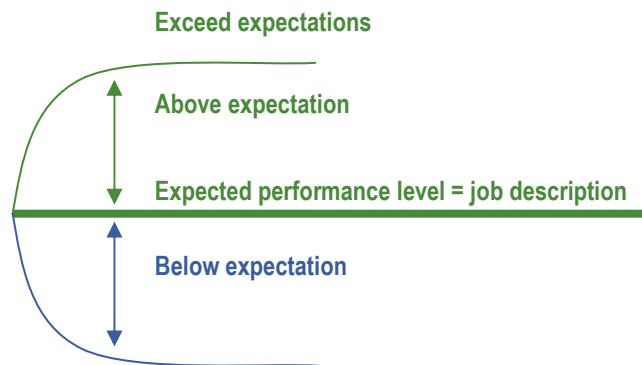
...and can at times even be perceived as 'unfair' by good workers in lower paid roles.

How to do it: Identify the good solid workers you rely on

Case Study: What one company found

- ➔ A group of Supervisors from one processing plant were asked to look at each of their employees to consider whether their work performance was 'on the line'; above; way-above; or below it.
- ➔ Depending on the room, they found 40% to 50% of the workforce was performing 'above-the-line' and a further 10% to 25% well beyond expectations.
- ➔ Only 20% of people were judged to be right 'on-the-line' and just 10% were thought below it!
- ➔ Yet the Supervisors felt much of their time was spent grappling with that 10%—people who were often absent; unskilled casuals; and a few permanent workers with limited skills and motivation.
- ➔ The Supervisors were surprised to identify that such a large proportion of the workforce was doing more than asked, without that being specifically acknowledged.
- ➔ However, they also noted that 'not everyone can be above-the-line':

"A company needs a group of reliable, consistent workers who may not have the aptitude or motivation to move up. They should be valued."



Above the line / Below the line Model

- ➔ Some people do exactly as asked (the job description). They set 'the line'.
- ➔ People who go that little bit extra—*Above Expectation*—can often be the bulk of your workforce.
- ➔ People who *Exceed Expectations* are the exceptionally high performers.
- ➔ People who exceed expectations stand out from the crowd and are probably being recognised by you and by co-workers—but what about that large body of workers on the line and just above it?

How to do it: Find simple ways to recognise and reward good work

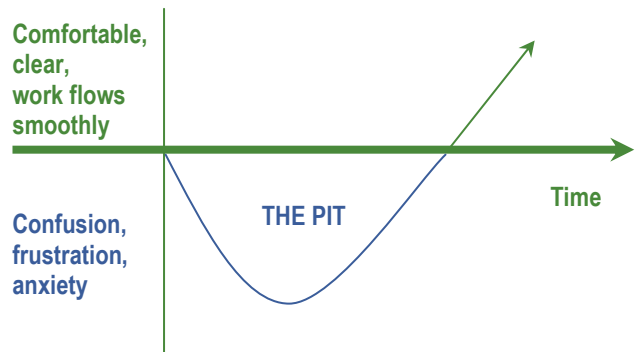
- ➔ Improving internal career opportunities is one way to say 'Thank You', but it's not necessarily for everyone.
- ➔ Simple actions—such as stopping to say, 'I hear you've been doing a great job' are appreciated.
- ➔ Acknowledge extra effort or OH&S achievements in newsletters—but don't turn it into a case where 'everyone gets a turn' or it will lose its value.
- ➔ Rewarding good workers can also be more general—one company simply put extra money into buying more comfortable clothing and footwear.
- ➔ Involving families in rewards (such as a picnic day with rides for the kids instead of alcohol for the adults) has worked extremely successfully in tough industries such as mining. It not only says 'Thanks'—it also says, 'Be proud of what you do!'.

Take Care—'Backfire': Case Study No 1

- ➔ A group of employees had been delivering 'above the line' performances in the loading bay for some time and were considered 'experts' in their field.
- ➔ They were highly committed and willingly stayed back to finish their job if there was a problem in the line.
- ➔ The company paid them at the highest classification in their field, but this was still quite low compared to some positions at the site and they didn't share in the bonuses the slaughtermen and boners received.
- ➔ The group felt the other 'rewards' were unfair and that their contribution wasn't equally valued.

How to do it: Give good workers time and support in a new situation

- Sometimes good workers are recognised with a move or 'promotion' to a new position—and their performance slips backwards. Why does this happen?
- Everyone who tries something new will go into 'The Pit'. How quickly and successfully they climb out of it depends on the type of support and understanding they get.
- Managers may understand that it'll take time to gain new skills, but they sometimes don't allow for the confusion, frustration and anxiety the employee feels while adjusting.
- Both the employee and the manager need to understand that *'things will get worse before they get better'*. Apart from time and practice, employees need formal 'permission' to make mistakes—as long as they learn from them.
- Reflecting on what has worked and what hasn't is an important part of the learning curve.
- As people learn by doing and reflecting on what they've done, they will start to head up the learning curve.
- Give them time and support and their performance and productivity will be much higher than it was before.



The Pit and Transformational Learning (Novak & Gowan 1984)

Take Care—'Backfire': Case Study No 2

- One company agreed to a promising young employee's request to 'learn air knives' in recognition of his extra effort.
- After a short trial, however, he was judged 'too slow' and put back in his original position without further explanation or support.
- His confidence was now shattered. Even his previous 'above the line' performance in the old job looked shaky.
- This employee, previously considered 'a good worker' was so despondent he seriously considered 'throwing in' his job.

How to do it: Don't say, 'But that's not how it's done around here!'

Case Study : Outside the Square

- Good meatworkers always sharpen their own knives, right? Well, not at one plant where there are now some very happy employees!
- One company introduced knife-racks and appointed staff to have all the knives clean, sharp and ready to go at the beginning of the shift.
- At first, some users were distrustful. They soon found it not only worked well—but saved them time at 'smoko' and after work.
- Benefits for the company came during audits and through improved slicing by inexperienced workers having better tools!

- Challenging traditional ideas of 'how it's always been done around here' is a good sign of a healthy workplace culture.
- Inviting suggestions for change from good workers may not only surprise you at the number of truly innovative solutions, you will also be reinforcing that you value them and their work.
- One process that has been used successfully in other industries is to ask one section how another section might operate more efficiently.
- This needs careful handling to ensure you don't create discord between work stations, but the responses aren't always self-focussed. Sometimes it's just a case of listening to someone who's 'on the outside looking in'.

Where you can find help to make it happen

- This Fact Sheet supports information in a booklet produced by the FTH Skills Council and MLA called 'How to become an employer of choice in an industry of choice' which is a practical guide to workforce development in the Australian Meat Industry.
- The booklet includes a section on *Retention* which has notes that are relevant to this topic, including content about why people leave their jobs as against why people stay in their jobs.
- A sub-section called *Tips for retaining mature age people* may be useful in managing good workers who have been with you for some time.
- The section on *Workplace Culture* provides a template to help identify whether your site is operating in a way which encourages your good workers to stay with you.
- Other Fact Sheets in this series may support or expand the content of this publication. You can access the Fact Sheets on the FTH Skills Council website.

Go to: www.fthskillscouncil.com.au

- One of the most useful support mechanisms to you in learning more about retaining your good workers is the exit interview.
- Yet research has shown that only one in four Australian companies use exit interviews effectively to help reduce their turnover.
- Employees who are leaving you for someone else usually willingly divulge their 'pull' factors—why they are taking the new job.
- While this information is useful, even more useful are the 'push' factors—the reasons they are so prepared to leave you.
- By using gentle probing techniques, you can encourage them to explain what caused them to disengage—so that they either went looking for something else, or were open to headhunting.
- Cover all aspects of your business—training, pay structures, benefits, work processes, conditions on the floor, management processes, etc.
- Responses from one person won't necessarily mean a change in anything—but capturing the data over time may help you identify patterns of issues you can fix to stop the flow of people.

Want to know more?

For further information about workforce development resources for the SA Meat Industry, please contact:

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