

Planning the Perfect Holiday Party



Your team has worked hard all year to achieve the results you expect. They've come in early, stayed late, and performed duties far beyond those listed in their job description. You've set the bar high. Everyone knows what's expected and they respect you as a leader. You've remained highly professional throughout the whole year.

Now that Thanksgiving has come to pass, you find yourself feeling a little sentimental about the holidays. Sure, there's still plenty of work to be done. But, you've taken a step back to really appreciate the effort everyone's put forth for the past 11 months. To show them your appreciation, it's time to plan a company holiday party. You don't want to do the typical catered appetizers and cheap wine. You really want to show everyone a good time. Planning a party that everyone's sure to enjoy isn't easy. If you're not sure where to start, check out our list of best tips below.

Budget

As you start planning your holiday party, all sorts of ideas are going to run through your head. Maybe it would be cool to have a DJ. Perhaps it's a fancy offsite venue with room for all trappings imaginable. While all these ideas sound like a blast, you have to keep your budget in mind. Yes, you want to throw a party that everyone will remember. However, the last thing you want to do is spend a chunk of quarterly profits on one night of fun.

Before you start putting down deposits and ordering the finest sushi in town, do some research and make sure you stay within your budget.

Decide on a Theme

Themes are fun. That's the bottom line. And the best part? Your options are limitless. A good place to start is taking a poll. Come up with a few ideas and circulate them through your organization. Maybe it's a casino night. What about a masquerade party? Who doesn't love a luau when it's frigid outside? Whatever theme you choose, make sure it's fun and won't raise any red flags with HR.

Book a Venue

Your employees spend the majority of their waking hours at the office. That's the last place they want to cut loose and have a little fun. If it's in your budget, book an offsite venue. Maybe it's the county fairgrounds. What about a bowling alley or roller rink? Whatever you choose, make sure it's a place people can get to that's within your budget.

Icebreakers

Your employees love the fact that you're throwing a holiday party. They get to bring their significant others and have a night of fun. That doesn't mean that they're going to be super comfortable mingling with everyone in the group. Chances are, Greg from the engineering team isn't going out of his way to say hello to Sam from accounts payable.

Holiday parties are a great time to foster cross-departmental integration. This is easy when you set up activities that encourage bonding. Set up teams for charades. What about trivia? Again, you can get as creative as you want. Just make sure they're fun and allow people to let their guard down.

White Elephant Gift Exchange

Who doesn't love an old-fashioned gift exchange? Well before your party commences, communicate that everyone should bring a gift for a white elephant gift exchange. It's a good idea to set a limit on how much money people should spend on their gift so it doesn't become a financial burden in any way. Usually \$10 or \$20 is affordable for everyone.

Entertainment

Entertainers are a hit at every party. Whether it's a hypnotist, magician or Santa, entertainment adds a fun dynamic to any party. Whatever entertainment you decide on, make sure to reserve it well in advance. The holiday season is where entertainers make their money and they book up quickly.

Transportation

The idea of having a holiday party is for everyone to have a good time. As they should. It's inevitable that some folks are going to have a little too much to drink. You shouldn't, but some people will. It's important that they get home safely. Spend the extra money to have transportation arranged for people that shouldn't drive. Hire a local cab company. Post an ad on Craigslist for Uber and Lyft drivers letting them know that there will be plenty of fares once the festivities end. The last thing you want is someone making the wrong decision and having to deal with the consequences.

Holiday parties are meant to be fun. They're a chance for everyone to come together, bond and share in some holiday cheer. Throwing a party that's memorable goes a long way in not only showing your appreciation for your employees but, boosting morale and carrying momentum through the end of the year. As long as you follow some of the advice above, stay within budget and make sure everyone is safe, your holiday shindig is sure to be a success.

Top Strategies to Foster Employee Engagement



In the age of technology and the rise of the [remote worker](#), employers the world over are finding it harder and harder and to keep people engaged. Even though the days of the “company man” still exist, the concept is becoming less and less prevalent. This is largely due to the fact that changing jobs, or even careers, multiple times is no longer seen with the same disdain it once was. As a result, employers are having to get more creative about not only retaining top talent, but keeping them engaged. If you find yourself with a revolving door of quality people coming and going, you might want to consider some of the following strategies.

What Makes Employees Feel Engaged?

Before you start thinking about how to keep employees engaged, you have to understand what the term means to them.

Recent research tells us that three words define what it means for an employee to feel engaged. Money isn't one of them. **Community, Value and Security.**

Community

Employees need to feel that they're included in the process. Being included in important meetings, asked for their input and communication all go a long way. Bottom line, if something important is going on, everyone needs to be kept in the loop.

Value

In order for employees to feel valued, they need to know that their work is important. This is why regular feedback, even if it's constructive goes a long way. If someone does an exceptional job, let them know. Even just a short email or

compliment goes a long way.

Security

This is a big one. With the prevalence of corporate takeovers and mergers, employees spend a lot of time on edge and looking over their shoulder. They're never sure when their position might be eliminated, or their head will be on the chopping block. If you want to keep people around and fully engaged, let them know that they don't have anything to worry about. Retirement plans, benefits, sales incentives, etc. all go a long way in easing employees' minds.

Now that we've defined what engagement means to people, let's discuss the best ways to keep them engaged.

Give People a Voice

Remember those surveys that companies would send out once a year to every employee to get their feedback? Those don't cut it anymore. Employees today, especially [Millennials and Gen Z](#), crave sharing of information, thoughts and ideas. That's why it's a good idea to have a central hub for communication not only within departments but between them. This space should be treated as a judgement-free zone. Sure, there are professional lines that need to be adhered to. But, employees should be able to be candid and share ideas and feedback freely.

Listen

It's any employee's job to listen to their boss. That goes without saying. But, guess what? It's also your job as a boss to listen to your employees. If an employee raises a concern or comes up with a good idea, consider what they have to say and put it into action. When people see that their ideas add value to an organization, they feel like they matter.

Everyone Learns Differently

There's a lot being made about different learning styles. And for good reason.

Some people learn by watching and listening. Others, by doing. That's why it's imperative to accommodate everyone and how they learn. The days of reading a job description and the employee handbook are gone. For people to be engaged, they need you to be an active part of the process. It's your job to identify their learning style and curtail your teachings accordingly. If you want to get the most out of your people, make their learning a top priority.

Creative Group Learning Sessions

You're all too familiar with the typical company training that involves a Power Point and a manager talking in front of a group. These can be impactful but, it's easy for them to become stale. An alternative is to do learning sessions in a way that involves and challenges everyone. You can get really creative here and have a lot of fun. An example might be dividing a team into groups to accomplish a certain task. Within a particular group, put someone that is shy or reserved in a position of leadership. While it might be uncomfortable for that person, you're challenging them to step outside their comfort zone. These kinds of learning activities can be a real catalyst for individual and collective growth.

There's no question that retaining quality people is harder now than ever before. The workforce has become smarter, values have changed, and technology has made it easier for people to do their job without being fully engaged. Sure, money is always a motivating factor for employees. More than anything though, they want to feel a sense of community, value and security. If you find yourself struggling to keep people around and excited about their work, try implementing some of these strategies. You just might be surprised by the results.

The Fine Line of Being a Boss and Friend



A lot has changed in the workplace since your father spent his 30 years being a company man. It used to be that bosses were just that, bosses. They commanded respect, called all the shots, were imposing and held your livelihood in their hands. The boss was the last guy you wanted to piss off.

While some things remain the same, there's a lot that's changed too. Sure, the boss is still the person in charge. But, if you're in a position of leadership, you've probably realized that how you go about your business and interact with the people you manage is vastly different from the model of old. Instead of barking orders, handing out disciplinary actions and leading by fear, you now have to play the part of mentor, friend, confidant and communicator. If it sounds like you have to be both a boss and friend in order to be an effective leader in the modern workplace, it's because it's true.

Honesty

If you think about your closest friends, it's expected that you're honest with each other. The same goes for your relationships at work. If an employee isn't making the grade, they need to know. Keep in mind that when you deliver constructive criticism, you need to both be tactful and not beat around the bush. Your employees want honesty and transparency and it's your job to deliver it.

The same holds true for [communicating with employees](#) when they go above and beyond. If you notice someone performing exceptionally well, by all means let them know. At the end of the day, you're expected to be candid with your feedback both positive and constructive.

There's No "I" in Team

You're the one in charge, that's a fact. But guess what? You're in charge of a team. In order for your organization perform optimally, it has to be a total team effort. That means creating the space for everyone's voice to be heard in the decision-making process. When issues arise, it's imperative that you solicit feedback from everyone. Sure, some people's ideas won't be realistic, but the mere fact that they had a chance to be heard means the world and also helps them get on board with the final decision. At least they were heard.

Hang Out

There's an ongoing debate about crossing professional lines when it comes to socializing and recreating with colleagues. The old guard maintains that work should stay at the office while the new school of thought encourages social interaction outside the office. While there's no defined line, studies have shown that engaging with your colleagues in a relaxed environment humanizes the experience and can actually be a catalyst for innovative ideas and candid conversations without fear of reprimand. So, maybe that Friday happy hour isn't such a bad idea after all.

BUT, the terms change when it comes to social media. It's absolutely fine to endorse someone for a skill on LinkedIn. However, overly engaging and Facebook and Instagram is never a good idea. First, doing so can be seen as an invasion of privacy. Second, if you're the boss that "creeps" or "pries," you liable to stir a hornet's nest and open yourself up to all sorts of negative accusations and outcomes. It can become an HR nightmare.

Keep it Professional

We've all heard stories about working relationships becoming more... And by more we mean romantic. Though it goes without saying, this is something that's worth repeating. Even if there's an energy, mutual attraction, shared interests or whatever, mixing work with pleasure is never a good idea. The conflicts of interest, propensity for office rumors and not to mention people's lives are at stake. So please, don't let interoffice romance ruin your career or someone else's.

Be Supportive and Empathetic

Everyone that works for you is human. And with that experience comes hard times on occasion. If someone on your team is going through a tough divorce, the loss of a loved one or any other personal struggle, you need to be there for them. Maybe you're the only one they can talk to in a moment of need. Just the simple act of listening can be more meaningful than you might think.

If someone you manage comes to you and asks for help or advice, it's your duty to assist however you can. Not only is it the decent thing to do, it can often be the difference in the employee continuing to perform or not making the grade, or even deciding to stay with the company or look for other opportunities.

It's a fine line you're going to have to walk as a leader. The line between boss and friend. There's no plug-and-play formula that shows you exactly how to do it. With that being said, if you make a conscious effort to stay within professional bounds while showing everyone on your team that you're a human just like them, your entire organization only stands to benefit.

How To Save Time and Get More Done at Work



Now more than ever it's easy to get distracted at work. Between emails, people coming and going, [LinkedIn](#) and Facebook alerts and of course the phone, it's

little wonder that you struggle to accomplish everything you have set out for the day. Sure, you tell your spouse, friends and family that you have no choice but to go in early, stay late and work on weekends. But are you really making the best use of every minute of the day? How much time do you honestly spend in the mental twilight zone looking at your ex-colleagues LinkedIn profile or checking your fantasy football lineup? You might not want to admit it, but there are some small steps you can take to be more efficient with your time and get more done.

Mindfulness

It might be hard to see the correlation, but studies have proven that incorporating the practice of [mindfulness](#) into your daily routine helps you stay focused and be more productive. So, what exactly is mindfulness? It can be anything from breathing exercises to a meditation routine to keeping a gratitude journal. The good thing about practicing mindfulness is that it doesn't take a lot of time. Even just a few minutes practiced on a daily basis can do wonders.

Time Blocking

Maybe you're good about time blocking. You set aside time throughout the week to check and send email, engage new prospects and get necessary tasks done. But how often are you interrupted? Either by someone else or of your own volition? In short, you know the importance of time blocking, but it often becomes difficult to stick to. Someone walks in your door, the phone rings or you see the email with the big red ! that says it just can't wait. Which leads us too... Plan your time blocks with a purpose. What do you want to get accomplished during that time block? Having a goal for the time block will help you stay on track.

Setting Professional Boundaries

If you're in any kind of position of leadership or you manage a team of people, you have to set professional boundaries. Of course, you have to have an open door, make sure everyone has the proper training and resources to do their job and meet the objectives set by your superiors. But what about you? Don't you need time to do your job instead of everyone else's? This is why it's important to make clear to everyone involved that you too need time to get things done. Whether

that means locking your door for an hour after lunch or not being available on Wednesdays after 11:00 am, you need to make it clear to everyone that while you're there to support them, you too need time to do your job.

Define Happy Hour on Your Terms

Who doesn't love a break for some interoffice levity and time to shoot the breeze? It's healthy, no one will question that. But when that two-minute check-in about Sunday's game turns into a 45-minute conversation about more than running backs, you're wasting time. The last thing you want to do is kill collegiality and morale, but you still need to get work done. If you want to be at the top of your game, define what and when happy hour is. It's important but, should be dictated on your terms.

Smart Phones Make You Dumb

It's a bit worrisome to think about how much smartphones dictate your every move. Yes, they are a convenience that allows you to work remotely and always be on call. But have you ever stopped to think about how they affect your productivity? That new Instagram like or Facebook post. Mindless notifications populate your screen constantly and at the end of the day don't matter. They only serve as a time suck to make you jealous. After 30 minutes in fantasy land, you look at the clock and it's 3:30 and you wonder where you left off.

If you want to be more productive and efficient with your time, set aside periods of time when your phone is off and tucked away in your drawer. That text will be there in an hour. In the meantime, do yourself and everyone else a favor and get some important work done.

Know When You're at Your Best

There are certain times of the day when you're more productive than others. For some it's before the sun comes up and for others it's late in the day. Knowing when you're the most productive is vital to your success. If you're someone that likes to sleep in until 7:30, read the paper and have a leisurely morning until 10:00 then more power to you. On the other hand, if you like waking up early and getting a pile of work done before most people wake up, all the better. The key is

to find the time of day when you're most productive and structure everything else around that.

The workplace demands a lot from you. There's the pressure of managing those under you and meeting the expectations of those above. Balancing everything is a full-time job to say the least. There's a reason divorce rates are on the rise and mental and physical health are gaining traction in the national conversation. If you want to [increase your productivity](#), reduce [stress](#) and get the most out of each and every day, try implementing some of the strategies above. You might just find yourself excelling in your job and getting home in time for dinner with those that really matter.

How-To Tell When an Employee Is About to Leave



Employees at every level are the backbone of any successful company or organization. Without quality people on your team productivity suffers, profits go down and the morale of everyone involved can sink to dangerously low levels. In a day and age where everyone is always on the lookout for a better opportunity and loyalty isn't what it used to be, employee turnover is a real concern. Not only are your best employees a tremendous asset, losing them and onboarding someone new can be prohibitively expensive. That's why now more than ever it's important to recognize the signs when a valuable employee is about leave.

Less Active in Meetings

Employees that are engaged are quick to share ideas and ask questions. If you notice that someone continuously shows up to meetings just to go through the mandatory motions, it might be a sign that they are less engaged and on their way out. Even if there is just something going on at home or with a family member, you should take note of this withdrawn behavior and at the very least ask if there is anything you can do to help.

Increased Absences

When a particular employee first started maybe they never called in sick or took extra time off. Now, all of sudden they either consistently show up late and leave early or simply don't show up at all. This is a red flag that you need to address right away as it's a clear sign that something is going on you aren't aware of.

No Longer Willing to Commit to Long-Term Projects

If you notice an employee is no longer willing to commit to long-term goals or assignments, it's likely a sign that they want to finish what work they have left and jump ship. It might even be the case that these types of assignments interfere with the start date of a new job. In this case, there might not be much you can do.

Starts Taking More Personal Calls

If you notice someone frequently excusing themselves from meetings or stepping into the hall to take personal calls something is definitely off. They could be dealing with a family emergency or talking with a prospective employer. While you can't make any assumptions, it's a good idea to check in with this person to make sure everything is alright.

Didn't Receive the Raise or Promotion

They Were Expecting

When someone expects to move up in a company and it doesn't happen, it's only natural for them to become less enthused with the work they do day in and day out. At this point, there's a high likelihood that they might begin looking for employment elsewhere. If you value this employee enough to keep them around, you'll probably have to provide some incentive for them to stay.

Major Life Event

Major life events like getting married, a sick family member, giving birth or a spouse finding a new job can change someone's reality in a heartbeat. When these sorts of events happen, they may change how an individual feels about their current employment situation. In some cases, there might be not much you can do but if the person is a critical asset you might want to make them an offer they can't refuse. It's up to you to make that call.

Friends Are Leaving

If someone has been at a company for any length of time, they have likely bonded with their colleagues and become friends. Not only do these people enjoy working together, they might even share hobbies outside of the office. If someone experiences a mass exodus of their friends leaving, they might be more inclined to leave too. In some cases, if an employee leaves, they may even recruit their colleagues to follow suit.

Difficult Relationships With Other Employees

Numerous studies have proven that happiness is more important in the workplace than salary. A major key to happiness is an individual's relationship with others. If friction exists between even just two employees, especially employees that work closely together, it may prove too much for them to take and they might quit. In order to prevent this from happening it's a good idea to regularly check in with everyone on your team to make sure everything is on the up-and-up.

You Just Know

As someone in a position of [leadership](#), you've had to develop the skills of reading people and trusting your intuition. From time to time you might get the sneaking suspicion that all is not well with a certain employee. The majority of the time you're probably right. When this happens, you're best to address the situation up front instead of waiting and continuing to wonder. By being proactive you place yourself in a position to address whatever the problem may be and your chances of retaining the employee are much greater.

It's unfortunate that days of loyal relationships between employees and the organizations they work for have largely diminished, but such is the reality in which we live. While this is a two-way street, employees are always going to look out for themselves first and foremost. If you want to lessen the amount of turnover you experience and save yourself the headache and cost of constantly having to hire new people, take note of some of the signs above. By doing so, you'll quickly find that your employees see you in a favorable light and will have much less of an incentive to look for work elsewhere.

If you are at the point of needing to hire a new employee or looking for a new job, contact me, Jeff King, for [recruiting in the Bay Area](#). I work with the [pharmaceutical, biotech, and medical device industries](#).

How to Deal with Difficult Employees



If you're in a position where you manage an entire department or even just a small team you've certainly had to deal with a bad egg or two. Whether the individual wasn't a good fit with the company culture, chronically showed up late or had problems with authority, you had to deal with them somehow. Though it's never a fun experience, it's a reality that every manager is going to have to deal with at some point.

Sadly, many managers let these people hold them captive because they are afraid to take action of any kind to either correct a behavior or dismiss the employee if that is what is necessary. This hesitation can have negative consequences for both you and the people you manage. In order to keep that from happening we've laid out the best ways to deal with difficult employees below.

Effective Feedback

Quality feedback, even if it is critical, is essential for handling employees that aren't performing up to standard. Where most managers spend weeks, months and even years complaining about employees and nothing else, good managers are willing to have difficult conversations and provide honest feedback if there are issues that need to be addressed.

How you go about providing this feedback is what makes all the difference though. Screaming, yelling and personal attacks only serve to add fuel to the fire and usually put the subject employee on the defensive. If you find yourself in a position where you're left with no choice but to have a difficult conversation with an employee, make sure you do so in a way that doesn't put them on the defensive and gives specific information on how they can improve.

Document Everything

If you're faced with having to reprimand an employee or even let them go, you're going to need documentation of behavior that provides grounds for disciplinary action. In addition to writing down detailed accounts of incidents that happened, you'll need specific dates, times and names of people that were witness to the behavior as well. While you might feel like you're being too negative about an employee by writing everything down, you have to realize it's the prudent thing to do.

Listen

If you're frustrated with someone you manage it's easy to lose sight of what's really going on. You might find yourself blinded by irritation, the seemingly hopeless state of the situation and the thoughts you already have in your head about the person.

When the time comes to sit down with this employee it's vitally important to be in a space where you're able to see things through their eyes. The reality is that your only chance of finding a solution is having a clear understanding of situation in its totality; that includes the perspective of the employee.

When you actively listen to someone, you'll often be surprised about what you can learn. Maybe the employee is having problems outside the office and you can recommend a place to go get help. Maybe you were unaware of some legitimate concerns they have that need to be addressed. Perhaps all this employee needed was just a chance to be heard and voice their opinion.

Be Clear and Consistent

You should create a plan of action for the employee to correct their issues and also ask for their input on what they are willing to do to fix it. This will get better cooperation from the employee if they have a say in the plan. When you set expectations make sure they are ones you can stick to as well. If you expect someone to perform a certain task by a certain time you have to hold them to it. If you hold employees to expectations sometimes and other times you let things slide, you send mixed signals and the results can be devastating for your team or

organization.

Don't Be Afraid to Set Consequences

If you've worked through the proper channels of trying to be proactive and nothing seems to have changed, it might be time to make some consequences known. The conversation might be something like the following.

Manager: "We identified (issue) a while back and but we haven't seen much improvement. I still believe you can turn this around, but we are at a point that if things aren't better by (specific date) than we won't have a choice but to (write you up, cut your hours, let you go, etc.)."

When people are faced with tangible consequences that could affect them negatively it's often the motivation they need to change. If not, as a manager you can rest assured you gave this person a fair chance.

Stay Professional

When you're frustrated with an employee it's human nature to think negatively of them. You're going to be tempted to gossip or vent to your colleagues but that's the worst thing you can do. When you disrespect people behind their back you foster an environment of distrust and pollute other peoples' perception of the troubling employee. Simply put, avoid this type of behavior at all costs.

Be Courageous

As a manager, you've assumed the responsibility of making tough decisions. There's nothing fun about having to fire someone but sometimes you're left with no other option. When you get to this point, don't put it off, don't make someone else do it and make sure you do it as professionally you can. Even though you're sure to feel bad, you have to remember you're doing the right thing and your team or organization will be better off.

No one is going to deny that dealing with difficult employees isn't any fun. As a manager though, this is part of your job. How you handle these tough situations is what makes all the difference. If you do nothing and continue let problems

persist, you'll be causing yourself undue stress and you risk sabotaging your teams' morale and productivity too. You may even lose your best employees if the problem is allowed to persist. Instead, if you employ some of the strategies listed above, you'll set yourself up to handle these situations proactively and professionally in a way that is best for everyone involved.

How Transparent Should You Be With Your Employees?



At some point in your career you've probably worked for a boss that always made you feel like you're constantly walking on egg shells. You never knew where you stood with this person. They rarely provided feedback, instruction or guidance on how to do your job or what they expected of you. You always were left wondering if the work you were doing was exceptional or didn't make the grade. The closed-door meetings you were left out of caused you undue stress and no matter how hard you tried you never received the praise you thought you deserved. At work the word used to describe the culture was fear.

Having learned from your own past experiences, you make it a point to be transparent with your employees. Such begs the question though, how transparent is too transparent?

Being Transparent Has Its Benefits

There is no denying that being transparent has its benefits. Perhaps the most obvious positive is that being transparent builds trust. By being transparent as a team lead or manager, you make clear what the expectations are for everyone in the organization. When transparency is present at the top, roles are clearly defined and people are free to do their jobs without having to wonder if they are meeting expectations.

Another benefit of being transparent is that it makes employees feel valued because they are more likely to be involved in the decision-making process. When employees feel like the job they do is important and they are valued as people, you're organization will experience far less turnover and everyone will be much better positioned to maximize productivity and efficiency.

Avoiding Information Overload

While it's beneficial for everyone when transparency exists, the fact remains that employees don't need to know absolutely everything to do their jobs. For junior employees who aren't charged with the responsibility of a C-suite executive, there's no need to give them information they don't need. In fact, overloading people with unnecessary information can create a sense of anxiousness and stress. When this happens, people have a hard time focusing and their [productivity suffers](#) as a result.

Should You Make Salaries Public Information?

It is becoming more and more a trend for companies to make public the salaries of all employees. While this is considered risky business by some, the practice has some potential benefits. Those that employ it believe it demonstrates openness and equality. The policy takes many of the unknowns out of the hiring process, makes expectations clear amongst [team members](#) and leaves plenty of room for people to grow within their respective roles.

The Importance of Maintaining an Open-Door Policy

There's no worse feeling for someone than wondering if they fit into an organization. When employees feel that they can comfortably come to you and ask even difficult questions, trust is created and you make it clear to everyone that open lines of communication exist. By keeping an open-door policy you foster a culture of inclusion and openness that can only be a benefit.

Working as a Team

When transparency exists within an organization, space is created for individuals to come together, share ideas, openly communicate and work as a team toward a shared goal. If everyone is on the same page and can get behind the vision and mission set forth by people in positions of leadership, the sky is the limit for how successful an organization can become.

Creating Transparency

If your company is in its infancy or you simply feel greater transparency is needed, it's a process that has to start from the top and be implemented at every level clear to the bottom and back up again. In order for it to work, transparency is something that has to be embraced by everyone in the entire company. Information and expectations need to be clearly stated in order for habits to change. If more open communication is what you're after, you may have to make an investment in new technology or infrastructure that makes the sharing of information easier.

You'd be hard pressed to find someone in business that says transparency is a bad thing. The truth is no one likes to feel like they are walking on egg shells, not valued enough to be included in the decision-making process or left wondering if they are meeting expectations. Transparency has many positive characteristics that can help organizations grow and become more cohesive. It's important to make sure you are transparent in the right ways however. The last thing you want to do is give people so much information that they become crippled. If implemented in ways that create a cultural of inclusion, open lines of

communication and trust, your organization will be in a position to flourish.

Interested in learning more about a [productive workplace](#)? Contact [Jeff King](#) with RQ Focus. He is a [Regulatory and Quality Recruiter](#) in the Bay Area.

Soft Skills that Employers Want in a New Hire



We've all been in the position of looking for a new job for one reason or another. Whatever the reason may be, searching for a job that fits your skillset comes down to more than having the best cover letter and updating your resume. Sure, those things might land you an interview but if you want to set yourself apart from the competition it's crucial that you demonstrate to your potential employer that you have the intangibles, or soft skills that it takes to do the job. Not sure exactly what soft skills are? You're in luck as we define them below and highlight the most important ones that employers are looking for.

What's the Difference Between Hard and Soft Skills?

There's no denying that hard skills are needed in every job. These skills are teachable and quantifiable. Skills like language proficiency and computer programming may be essential for the job and your performance can easily be measured.

On the other hand, the term soft skills references things like your ability to show up on time, meet deadlines, communicate with clients and work in a team. Though they are tougher to measure on a standard review or evaluation, soft skills are noticeable and can make or break your chances of landing the job you covet.

Solving Problems

Let's face it, the vast majority of jobs in the modern workplace entail far more than what is written in a job description. While certain tasks and expectations should be explicitly laid out in front of you, you're going to be expected to think outside the box and handle challenging situations in an effective manner. If you're headed in for an interview, you best be prepared to discuss situations in which you've had to be resourceful and overcome adversity in the past.

Cultural Fit

Even if you have hard skills that jump off the page to a hiring manager it's equally important that you're a good fit for the company culture. Is the company one where both hard work and fun are valued? Are you expected to wear a tie every day or is denim on casual Fridays the norm? If you take the time to do some preliminary research about the company and its culture, you'll not only be better prepared for the interview but be able to gauge whether the company's core values align with yours or not.

Dependability

One of the top skills that employers look for is dependability. Though they may seem simple, habits like showing up on time, meeting deadlines and being readily available go a long way in determining your value as an employee. If you land an interview be prepared to honestly answer questions about your work ethic and share examples of how you've demonstrated dependability in previous jobs. This is also becoming more important as some employers are allowing employees to work remotely on occasion or on a regular basis. And if you seek a position that allows the flexibility to work from home, or should make sure you have some good examples of when you've done that and met your deadlines.

Coachability

Let's say that you have all the skills and experience necessary to do the job you're applying for. It's easy to think that you'll jump right in and be a catalyst for success. Even if such is the case though, it's a virtual certainty that the processes and systems you'll be working with are different from what you're accustomed to. Having an open mind and being willing to listen shows your employer that you're open to learn and can easily adapt. In my years of recruiting, I've seen numerous occasions where the person that was hired was not the one with the strongest technical skills, but the one that showed more enthusiasm and willingness to learn what they didn't know.

Being Open to Feedback

If you're just starting out in a new job there's going to be a significant learning curve. It's almost a guarantee that you're going to make mistakes, and that's understandable. How you handle feedback however, is what can set you apart. Are you open to suggestions or do you shut down and see constructive criticism as a personal attack? If you take your ego out of play and welcome feedback from others, you'll quickly be seen as a team player that adds value to the organization. Conversely, if you take criticism as a personal attack, you may be viewed as someone who will cause problems within the group.

Taking Initiative

While it's important to do more listening than talking when you first take a new job, employers value people who aren't afraid of taking initiative. During an interview you'll likely be asked to talk about a time when you came up with a new idea and how it was implemented. If you can demonstrate that you're comfortable with thinking outside the box and putting those thoughts into action your employer will know that you bring a lot more to the table than simply being a task master.

Flexibility

There's little doubt that rigidity can be the kiss of death in the workplace.

Whether you're working in accounting or as an events coordinator you're going to be asked to adapt to change and reprioritize at some point. Do you become flustered or are you able to take everything in stride? Your ability to meet a deadline a day earlier than expected or change the scope of a marketing campaign at a moment's notice goes a long way in the eyes of your employer.

There's no doubting the value of a polished resume and being prepared to highlight your skillset in a job interview. What's going to set you apart however, is your ability to demonstrate the soft skills necessary to be effective in the workplace. Are you willing to listen, learn and adapt? Do you work well with others in a collaborative environment? Are you capable of voicing your opinion and implementing new ideas and methods? If you can answer yes to these types of questions and demonstrate soft skills to your employer, you'll set yourself apart from the competition and greatly increase your chances of landing the job.

How-To Manage Your Employee's Time Off



If you're like most hard-working Americans, chances are you laugh at the idea of working 40 hours a week. The reality is that you probably are the first one to the office in the morning and the last to leave in the evening. You probably even show up on the occasional Saturday morning or Sunday evening because you have no other choice. "Time off" is probably laughable to you but it's vitally important.

Not just for you, but your employees as well.

Your company is only as good as the people on the ground and in the trenches. Your expectations are high and your employees take pride in the job they do for their own sake and that of the company. You probably have great relationships with most of them and your culture is one of teamwork and inclusion focused on a greater goal. Even if all this holds true, the number one complaint from employees across the board is not having appropriate time off to recharge so they are able to maximize productivity and efficiency while at work. Such begs the question, how do you balance maximizing productivity while making sure your employees can be at their best each and every day they come to work?

Be Upfront About Paid Time Off Policies

In the modern workplace, employees see paid time off and benefits just as important as a competitive salary. If your competitors offer more attractive PTO perks, you'll struggle to hire and retain qualified people. It's paramount to make sure all employees know and understand PTO policies immediately during the hiring process. These policies should be clearly stated in the employee handbook and readily available for access upon request.

Forecast and Plan Ahead

If you've been in business for any length of time, you likely have a good idea of when your busy and slow times are. This should directly affect how you manage PTO requests. If your busy time is the winter holiday season and all hands on deck are needed, your PTO policies and labor budgets should reflect that trend. Effectively writing, communicating and implementing these policies up front lets employees plan their time off in a manner that is best for them and also aligns with company needs and objectives.

Set Deadlines for PTO Requests and Approval

While time off is essential for every employee's well-being, it's important that they communicate their requests well in advance so managers can aptly plan for their

absence. Communicating these deadlines to all employees at once creates transparency and ensures fairness.

If many PTO requests are made at one time, it's imperative to have a policy in place for the priority in which those requests are processed. Whether your policy is first-come-first serve, based on seniority or some other metric, it needs to be made clear to all employees so that everything is black and white.

Incentivize Employees During Peak Times

It's widely known that employees are tremendously more motivated by incentives than they are reprimand. Budgeting and forecasting for incentives like holiday pay and bonuses is a great way to offer a win-win for your employees without sacrificing productivity. For those that want to take time off, the deadlines and policies have been clearly laid out. For those that are motivated to make extra pay, times like these are a great opportunity to cash in. The key once again is effective planning, policy setting and communication.

Make Your Schedule Rotational

I'll say it again, transparency and communication are your best friends. Not everyone works Monday through Friday 9:00-5:00 on your team or in your organization. No one wants to be "on call" on a Friday night when they could be at happy hour or at their child's soccer game. This time is fleeting and spreading that responsibility equally and fairly amongst your employees ensures that everyone is on a level playing field.

Be Flexible

Any reasonable employer makes time for deaths in the family or illness. That only goes so far however. Circumstances come up in your life. It's unrealistic to expect every single one of your employees to stick to a regimented rotational schedule without any room for variance. Allowing employees to reasonably switch days or shifts goes a long way in building morale within your team knowing that you've got their back and the favor will be returned someday.

It's important that these schedule requests be approved by a superior however.

Having an open and balanced conversation with your employees about last minute schedule requests is essential for the health and productivity of the entire organization.

Everyone in the modern-day workforce wants to feel valued for the job they do and compensated accordingly. While higher wages are great, managing time off in a favorable, but efficient manner shows those that work for you that you care on a human level. With proper planning, policy setting and communication, accommodating PTO requests can make everyone of your employees feel valued and empowered. Good news for everyone involved.

Best Practices for Helping Employees Set Goals



If you're in any kind of management position, you're charged with helping each and every one of your employees do their job and fulfill their potential. Anything short of this can be detrimental for your team, and the entire organization.

Goal setting is widely lauded for its merits of building morale, bringing about continuity and motivating employees. Unfortunately, goal setting in practice often resembles something entirely different. All too often, managers call in employees for their 30-minute quarterly or yearly reviews and go through a prepared list of questions and metrics that fall short of addressing individual needs and performance. To many employees, meetings like these are seen as laughable attempts from higher-ups to check in from 30,000 feet.

If you're serious about getting the most out of your employees and taking your team or organization to new levels, effectively helping employees set goals is an essential part of the process.

1) Know Your Employees

Every employee is different. Each of them listens, learns and produces in their own way. As a manager it is your job to adapt your communication and teaching style to each individual. In order to get to know your employees taking a [personality test](#) can provide tremendous insight to who they are as people. If you don't have access to a personality test, simply spending some time talking to your employee and getting to know what drives them, what interests them, and what they would like to achieve in their business and personal lives can give you great insight.

Not only will this help you communicate with your employees, but they will be better suited to communicate with co-workers and customers as well. When it comes to goal setting, arming yourself with knowledge of your employees as people only helps you to set goals that are tailored for them.

2) Make Goals the Employee's Idea

No one likes to be barked at and told what they need to do better in their job. This approach to goal setting is often viewed by employees as meaningless and scathing. Instead, invite your employees to take part in a two-sided conversation about their performance and objectives. Asking probing questions is a great way to steer the conversation in a certain direction while also allowing employees to think for themselves. Give them an idea of what needs to be accomplished and ask them what they can do to help achieve it. This helps them participate in the process and take early ownership of their role.

If your employees feel that they have been heard and that goal setting was a collaborative experience, the results will surely show in the workplace.

3) Set Goals that can be Measured

We set goals for ourselves all the time. They usually are something like, 'I'm going to lose weight' or 'I'm going to make more time for my family.' These goals

usually aren't attained for a simple reason. They lack measurability and accountability.

When you're working with employees to set goals, make sure they are attainable, measurable and have accountability and incentives tied to them as well. When employees are readily able to track their progress and feel a goal is within reach, they are increasingly motivated to hit the target. Once a goal is attained, employees will be all the more excited to reach the next one. This spells good news for the entire organization.

4) Align Goals with Company Objectives

It's human nature that we are more inclined to put forth our best effort if we feel like we are part of something great. The [best companies to work for](#) know this and make it a cornerstone of how they do business. They take every step necessary to get each employee on board with the company's mission. Setting individual goals that are in line with company objectives and culture goes a long way in motivating employees to reach their full potential. Don't expect your employees to be excited about working with blinders on, allow them to see their part in the bigger picture.

5) Be Consistent and Transparent

While it's vitally important to curtail goals to each individual, they should be similar for all employees with a certain level of responsibility. People talk and if one employee's goals are vastly different from another's of the same stature, you are sure to incite jealousy and angst which are toxic in the workplace. It could also lead to accusations of favoritism, which could undermine the management of your team.

6) Take a Step Back and Look at the Entire Picture

All too often managers are quick to bring down the hammer on employees that aren't meeting expectations. The truth is however, yelling and punishing rarely solve anything and more often than not make employees more disengaged and

unmotivated. When setting goals for employees that fall short, it's important to take a step back and look at the entire situation. Did this employee receive proper training? Were expectations clearly spelled out? Do they feel they are part of the team striving for a greater good? Did they have the resources or equipment they needed to succeed?

Looking at the bigger picture to identify shortcomings often reveals easy fixes that can be communicated constructively in a nurturing manner. Make these employees a priority and help them create an action plan to achieve desired results. Ask them what they feel they might need from you to be able to reach their goals. It lets them know you are supporting them and also puts the responsibility on them to succeed. If the proper steps are taken, these employees often become top performers.

As a manager, you're only as good as your team. Checking in regularly and collaboratively setting clear and measurable goals for each individual under you is paramount to achieving desired results. Setting aside appropriate time to meet with employees on a human level lets them know you care. It doesn't take much, but simply knowing you want what's best for each individual goes a long way in increasing productivity, efficiency and morale in any organization.