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Emergent workers demand respect

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San Antonio Express-News

Every employee yearns to be treated like a human being at work. But forced to tolerate and expect far less, dissatisfied employees are taking advantage of the upturn in the job market by seeking employment elsewhere.

Very quickly, the exodus of valued employees has intensified a major issue that companies throughout the United States already were grappling with — retaining valued employees.

This comes at a delicate time when most companies are still coming to terms with a more diverse work force and customer base. But the very companies that haven't adequately addressed diversity issues are the ones losing workers and customers.

"Low employee morale is a serious problem at the vast majority of companies," said Judy Tso, a Boston-based diversity consultant. "Left unchecked, it can lead to long-range turnover, low productivity and a drop in company value."

It's common sense that regardless of their gender, ethnicity, religious beliefs, age or sexual orientation, all employees deserve an inclusive, welcoming work environment. But it's proving to be a hard lesson for most companies to learn.

Rather than being proactive on the diversity front, too many companies are allowing the prejudices, biases and stereotypes of co-workers — especially managers and supervisors — to chase off qualified employees and to bring on discrimination lawsuits.

Already, the huge gender discrimination lawsuit against Wal-Mart is expected to pave the way for similar suits against other big companies that show prejudice against certain categories of employees.

In the Wal-Mart case, 1.5 million former and current female employees have alleged that the world's largest retailer pays female employees less than men for the same jobs, passes them over for promotions and retaliates against contrarians.

Good management is the key to employee satisfaction, commitment and retention. But far too many managers are insensitive to employees, especially those who are different from themselves. They're stuck in the outdated mode of "I'm the boss and you'll do what I tell you to do."

That doesn't work in today's workplace, where the "emergent worker" is being discovered in droves. These are the workers who feel in control of their careers and want an employer who treats them with dignity and respect, gives them important roles in the organization and rewards them on their performance.

Diversity experts say that managers who can't be enlightened about employee needs should be replaced. If not, companies should expect to continue losing their best workers, as well as their competitive edge.

"You can't have an inflexible manager over employees who are passionate about their work, their potential with the company. You're just stifling creativity and productivity," said David Tulin, an executive coach and consultant in Philadelphia. "Employees will leave when they feel they can make a difference at another job."

Emergents are more concerned with opportunities for mentoring and growth. Company loyalty is meaningless to an emergent view of the workplace.

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"Employees don't have to tolerate being treated like they're stupid," Tso emphasized. "For a well-functioning workplace, employers must start empowering employees to be self-directed and help them work together in a more humane, considerate environment."

Although maintaining good employee morale is a fairly simple concept, most companies have found that achieving it is far from easy.

Motivated first by the threat of discrimination lawsuits, companies started with quality initiatives and experimented with employee satisfaction programs. Those morphed into inclusion initiatives and sensitivity training and finally into the latest variety — diversity training.

Companies must see a happy, diverse work force as essential to their survival before any training can be useful.

"If companies don't have a good understanding of why employees are leaving, they're going to have a difficult time turning it around," Tso said.

"Cultivating an environment that is supportive of different cultures needs to begin now. By waiting, companies will experience a shortage of women, different ethnic groups and gays. A diverse work force is essential to drawing a diverse consumer base."

Some Fortune 500 companies have become more responsive to their employees' desire to be essential to the organization's success. They're tired of losing their best employees to competitors, and they know that happy employees are good for business.

A few have gone so far as to create diversity departments to ensure they continue hiring a diverse staff that will stay because their contributions are welcomed and valued.

Window dressing won't work. "This needs to be seen as the right, ethical thing to do and the necessary business strategy to survive and grow," Tulin said. "Awareness is not enough. It needs to be fully integrated into the corporate culture. The structure of a company needs to be improved to be effective in recruiting and retaining good employees."

Specialists agree that diversity is an issue that will not go away anytime soon. But there's solid evidence that companies are trying to be more attuned to worker needs. Diversity training has become a huge industry.

"Companies are realizing that people of color, women, the disabled and gays all have brains, and that brainpower is what is needed to keep an organization competitive," said B.J. Gallagher, a Los Angeles diversity consultant and author. "This is a good thing. The more people are valued for their brains, talent, creativity and skills, the less we will get hung up on the differences."

The long-term goal of diversity specialists like Gallagher is that in time all of the categories of diversity will fall by the wayside and everyone in society and in the workplace will see themselves and others simply as people.

"We need to balance our discussions of differences with discussions of similarities — understanding that the desire for quality service and quality products is something we all have in common," Gallagher said.

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