

Retaining good employees

BUDGETS AND STAFF are cut. Raises are slim or nonexistent. The weather disrupts best-laid plans.

Human resource consultants would tell you that employee engagement and retention are threatened.



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But you already knew that. You have a more limited bag of tricks to keep good workers and to keep them happy.

In a profession like turf management, in which it can take nearly a full year to train a worker for all seasons, replacing workers can be costly and time consuming. It just makes sense to hold on to the good ones and keep their spirits up. Fortunately, even with limited resources, there are ways to bolster employee satisfaction.

Around the country, some top turf management programs have found that one of the least costly but most appreciated employee benefits is flexible scheduling.

"I try to be as honest as I can about our needs but also respect that they have families and that their time away is valuable," said David Rulli, manager of stadium operations for Jefferson County Schools in Lakewood, CO whose fulltime staff of five manages four stadiums and five fields, putting on more than 400 events a year.

"I've found that the biggest thing is setting the parameters — no surprises — about when our busy times are," Rulli said. "But I also try to be understanding when somebody needs a day off. If somebody needs a flexible schedule, I don't say no if I can possibly do it. I have a younger staff, and I know that weddings come up and things like that, and if I can accommodate them, I'm going to do it because that time off is a reward for the pride they take in what we do."

There are more formal flexible scheduling options used around the country, designed to give workers more days off in a row. One option allows for a work week of three 12-hour days plus a half day on the fourth day.

Another option, used at the University of South Carolina-Upstate, schedules four 10-hour days, giving three-day breaks from the job.

"That helps retention," said Bruce Suddeth, director of building and landscape services. Also valued, he said, are split shifts which let staff members escape the broiling midday heat. Those ad hoc schedules allow employees to work early morning hours and then return later in the afternoon.

The city of Tracy, CA is having good luck with a scheduling plan that gives workers a three-day break every other week. Employees are scheduled for four nine-hour shifts followed by a shorter shift on the fifth work day. To cover weekends, employees' schedules are staggered so that some have different start and stop days for their work weeks.

"It's a selling point. People appreciate it," said Don Scholl, superintendent of parks, sports fields and trees, who acknowledges that "the intent is to minimize overtime. We do incur some, but it's clear that when the budget isn't there, we have to look elsewhere for rewards."

Scholl's department also eases the workload on regular staff by employing youth through a labor department grant and assigning them to litter removal, restroom cleaning and other tasks that require less experience.

Looking elsewhere to share some of the grounds keeping workload is a common tactic. At Suddeth's school in Spartanburg, S.C., students, coaches and maintenance staff help do the grounds keeping for the NCAA Division 1 athletic program that has soccer, baseball, softball, track and field teams. Students on work/study programs, independently hired student employees, and interns from the horticultural program at a nearby technical college help ease the workload on his budget-crunched staff.

"And we get a lot of help from our coaches. They don't just sit on the sidelines and point fingers. They actually help on field

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maintenance, and that helps a lot to manage costs and workload,” Suddeth said, noting that the buy-in from students and staff helps instill pride in the facilities.

Similarly, there’s been no money for raises for Waukegan Park District employees in Illinois. So Scott MacLean, manager of park maintenance, said he tries to compensate with a popular employee benefit, a pass card for the staff to use the golf course, swimming pool and fitness center at no charge.

More important, MacLean said, is making sure that seasonal workers know they’re appreciated. At the end of each season, he sends thank-you notes and invites the good seasonal workers to return the following year.

“It’s a nice for us because they’ve already been trained, and it’s nice for them because they can concentrate on school and don’t have to worry about finding a job next summer,” MacLean said.

Whether talking about seasonal or year-round employees, managers agree that retention depends on hiring conscientious, self-motivated people, training them well, setting clear expectations and then not overwhelming them with micromanagement. Good workers will stay, Scholl said, if you can “give them the tools they need to be successful, let them take on new responsibilities, give them leeway to make decisions, and give regular pats on the back.”

Rulli said budget cuts in the Jefferson County School district

“seem like the worst of times in my 31 years, but we’re probably no different from anyone else. We’ve all had to learn to be more efficient with our workforce.”

To avoid burning out employees, he said, it’s important to “prioritize what needs to be done” and “don’t beat yourself up, or your staff, if you can’t it all done.”

MacLean agreed; “Communicate your expectations well but be realistic about them. If it rains, we may not get all the parks cut.” And he said he’s found one other key to employee retention that doesn’t cost anything — a sense of humor.

“We talk about attitude a lot,” MacLean said. “You’re outside. Enjoy it. It’s all about attitude. We know that. So I take a lot of time saying please and thank you.” ■

Diane Stafford is a business writer and workplace columnist at The Kansas City Star. This is the fourth in a series of seven articles in the 2010 Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have again partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront. For more information, go to www.STMA.org or www.Ewing1.com.

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