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Managing Important Employees Who Aren't Key Employees



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Successful businesses require many types of employees to succeed. But it's vital to know which employees are key employees, which are important employees, and how

to properly motivate the latter group. Today, we'll share a process to help you motivate important employees who aren't key employees.

Key Employees vs. Important Employees

You likely have more important employees than key employees at your business, which makes it critical to know how to motivate them. Before you can properly motivate important employees, it's essential to know the difference between them and key employees.

- **Key employee:** An employee who has a talent or skill that's difficult to replace, whose absence would tangibly harm the business, and who can take the business to the next level.
- **Important employee:** An employee who has institutional knowledge and an understanding of the business' processes, but who isn't willing or able to take the business to the next level.

Key employees often have leadership or ownership ambitions. Important employees may be happy in their roles and don't necessarily have the skill or motivation for ownership.

This key difference means that owners should avoid treating these sets of employees the same. For example, you'd be more likely to create a comprehensive incentive plan to motivate, retain, and reward key employees. Often, these incentive plans move key employees toward bigger responsibilities (and bigger rewards for fulfilling those responsibilities).

But important employees—who may not be able to fulfill or don't want the responsibilities that come with comprehensive incentive planning—likely have different motivations. Here are a few ways to keep these important employees motivated.

1. Ask what motivates them.

A fatal mistake many owners make is assuming that employees view themselves the same way owners do. It's surprisingly common for owners to assume that employees have bigger or smaller ambitions than they really do, which can cause owners to use improper motivational techniques.

So, before you commit to any hard strategies to motivate any of your employees, it's a good idea to understand your employees first. For instance, you may work through a process to determine where your longer-term employees see themselves in the business in the future. You may use that process to ask them what aspects of their time with the company they've enjoyed most, and when they've felt most appreciated or valued.

Once you understand how your employees view their futures and pasts, and combine that with the roles you want them to play in the company, you can more accurately decide whether each of them is a key employee or an important employee. From there, you can work with your advisor team to craft programs that properly motivate your employees.

2. Offer incentives that fulfill their needs.

Important employees, like key employees, want incentives. However, the kinds of incentives you provide important employees will likely be much different than those you provide key employees.

Whereas key employees often look for greater leadership opportunities and hefty monetary rewards for going above and beyond, important employees may not have interest in those kinds of rewards or responsibilities. They may find more value in some of the following:

- More time off
- Greater flexibility in where and how they work
- Early access to important company announcements
- Employment opportunities, such as internships, for qualified family members (e.g., kids and grandkids)
- Synthetic equity in the company
- Special recognition

Important employees may lean toward recognition and perks more than being a mover and shaker at the company.

3. Acknowledge their importance.

Just because an employee isn't key doesn't mean they aren't valuable. As you implement motivational strategies, it's crucial that you avoid underselling how essential your important employees are.

Doing so often requires careful communication and consideration. In other words, you don't want your important employees to believe that you think less of them just because they don't have ambitions for things like ownership.

Important employees want you to understand, value, and reward them, but differently than key employees. By acknowledging their importance and implementing appropriate motivational strategies, you can keep important employees on board and contributing toward your company's future success.

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