

5 ingredients to build a business employees want to work in

 By Judith Middleton, issued by DUO Marketing + Communications

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Anyone who runs a business today will understand how important people are to the success of an organisation. Talent acquisition is only one half of the coin, the other is retention, and so when we consider the great resignation of the post-pandemic world, holding onto key talent is front of mind for any business owner, CEO or C-suite.



Judith Middleton, CEO of DUO Marketing and Communications

Skilled people can work anywhere – gone are the days when someone would be restricted to their city or suburb, and have to make do with inordinate amounts of time spent commuting. Geography matters little in a hybrid or remote world, especially in service industries such as digital marketing and communication.

A member in our broader team still speaks about the horror of almost three hours a day on Johannesburg's roads – just to get to the office and home. This team member will never do it again.

However, besides the convenience afforded to employers and employees by being able to choose to work from almost anywhere, timezone and industry permitting, the pandemic has changed what people find important and prioritise.

Money is obviously a driver in any decision to work, simply because life costs money and the cost of living has increased hugely. However, title, seniority and other carrots that were used in days gone by are increasingly becoming superfluous, and often irrelevant.

Home-life balance and mental health have been thrust into the spotlight. Employees are placing increasingly more value on finding the right balance, where the quality of their lives doesn't suffer in the name of climbing the career ladder.

Let's call a spade a spade – it is not unusual to see agency resources spending in excess of 60 hours a week, often on site, dealing with huge, unrewarding pressure, both internally and from clients. The not-so-secret fear on our agency streets is burnout or high staff turnover as talented people succumb to the pressure, one by one. The agency world has been like this for years and years, long before the pandemic.

The key, then, for an employer or agency owner is to get the balance right for staff: an environment where they enjoy a healthy work-life balance, but crucially, find it rewarding to invest in the business and its clients, delivering excellence not because they fear reprisals if they don't, but because they wake up wanting to do this.

It's almost impossible to run a business in a way that is contrary to who you are as a person. In other words, a leader's value system sets the tone for the entire organisation. Leadership style influences every conversation about culture, values and staff wellbeing.

How does this start? It starts with how leaders treat themselves, and how they embody the same values they wish to see flourish in their organisation. If you want accountability, you must be accountable. DUO was launched at a time when PR and marketing agencies were making predatory promises but getting away without being accountable for following through with results.

This may or may not still be the case today, but it set the tone for our trajectory and along our journey I believe we've uncovered at least one list of ingredients for a recipe for staff-retention success, in terms of agency growth and awards,

but also in terms of staff happiness and retention.

1. Pursue measurable results and be brave to step out of comfort zones

Clients obviously want measurable results. If you can show them the data, and how their objectives can be achieved, they're likely to buy into your strategy and more likely to trust you when you take them out of their comfort zones. When the campaign is done, data from measurement is what reinforces the client's belief – because they can see that they are achieving what they set out to achieve.

It is the same with employees. They want measurable results, and they want to see how achieving these results will influence their career trajectories. Similarly, when given the freedom to try new things, to step out of their comfort zones, employees tend to spread their wings and fly for the business – precisely because they can see the data, so to speak.

2. Develop authentic relationships

This is not just a fashionable phrase, it should be a way of life. When an agency's key staff build meaningful relationships with clients it becomes a two-way street where both sides extract value from the relationship. They trust each other to do what's best.

It's the same with employees – if they genuinely feel that the relationships being built between them and the leadership, and between them and their colleagues, are authentic, they're more likely to re-invest. If other team members are stretched, they'll step in. Authentic relationships underpin almost everything in a business.

On the other hand, if a leadership team is incentivised to chase financial targets and not develop authentic relationships with its staff, they may well achieve money targets but they'll do so at the cost of high staff turnover.

3. Prioritise integrity, transparency and accountability

These three pillars speak directly to the previous point: no relationship – whether with clients or your own staff – will last if it is not grounded in integrity, if there is no transparency, and if either party is not held accountable to promises made. Again, this alchemy must be driven top-down by the leadership – any value system is only as solid as the example being set at the top.

4. Show staff the bigger picture

It may be unsettling for some business leaders to consider sharing financial information with their staff, but the rewards are almost immeasurable. Talking to the value system of integrity, transparency and accountability, when a team member sees the basic financials, the work pipeline, and targets being surpassed, met or missed, two things happen.

First, they understand how and where they fit into the bigger picture - they can join the dots between their individual effort and the total performance of the business. Because they've been included and entrusted with this information, more often than not, they want to do more, go the extra mile, to grow the revenue.

Secondly, if the business is performing well, they develop a sense of ease around their future job prospects. In other words, staff buy into the mindset of growth and development because they are an integral part of it, not just pawns on a playing table.

5. Treat KPIs like SLAs and celebrate small wins

An agency that consistently and honestly assesses its execution against an SLA, striving to innovate and push boundaries positively in achieving results, will keep that client and grow with them.

Similarly, an agency that develops this mindset with its staff will empower them to take control of their performance

agreement with the business. Acknowledge the big and small wins to show that their efforts are being appreciated.

Before long, an employee will ask his or herself the following questions independently of the leadership driving the performance review conversations: How am I tracking? Where can I learn? I have the space to develop and grow in entirely new areas, so where should I be focusing? What can I do to innovate and push boundaries positively within my role in the business?

This list is not an exhaustive recipe for success in attracting and retaining staff. However, it goes a long way towards attracting, cultivating and retaining an employee of the future. An employee of the future is one that demonstrates astute commercial thinking, is always learning, willing to serve, upskilling and testing his or herself, services clients honestly and with accountability, treats fellow employees with respect, transparency and integrity, and wakes up in the morning wanting to go to work.

ABOUT JUDITH MIDDLETON

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