

# Mission Ready

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## Retaining Your Best People, Part Two

The first step towards retaining one's top performers is to realize that they could be gone tomorrow. That cheerful, loyal superstar, whom you love like a son or daughter, and who has never given any indication of dissatisfaction with the company, may already be composing the resignation letter. When he, or she, comes in with the bad news, it is too late to persuade them to stay; commitments have already been made. At that point, you may remind yourself that everyone is "replaceable." But then, when you consider the cost to replace, and retrain, that top performer, it seems disproportionately high. Suppose he took a few of his key customers with him, over to the competition? Suppose she brought along, in her train, a couple of loyal staff members? Yes, everyone is replaceable, but wouldn't it be nice to keep them, and to prevent this unnecessary injury to your company?

Retaining the cream of the crop does not necessarily mean raising salaries, or increasing the perks. For proof, one only has to look at the Marine Corps. With the fewest perks of all the armed forces, and the most Spartan living conditions, the Marines nevertheless have the highest reenlistment rate. They not only attract the best, they are able to *retain* the best. Now, either Marines are crazy, or senior management knows what it's doing. While reserving the former proposition as a distinct possibility, let us examine the latter.

There may be no other organization in which senior management tells its membership so frequently, just how important it is—to the Corps, to the country, to the com-

munity. The Marine Corps is an organization essentially composed of minimum wage employees, yet the individual Marine considers it an honor to belong. Not only did he or she have what it took to *become* one of the Few and the Proud, he or she *still* has what it takes to remain—to reenlist for another tour of duty, when it is common knowledge that more money can be made on the "outside." Rather than telling them how "replaceable" they are, the organization has convinced these Marines that the Corps would be diminished by their leaving. Out of love for the organization, the cream of the crop stay. These men and women realize that the very qualities which would make them such valuable assets to a corporation are needed by the brotherhood which has accepted them.

Can that sense of commitment and obligation be created in today's corporations? By all means—if one does it the Marine Corps way. To begin: create in the candidate a feeling of gratitude for being accepted into the best company in the industry. [And if you don't believe you *are* in the best company, go find it.] Then create a sense of mission that will sustain your employee on the job and off the job, so that he or she will be less susceptible to competitive offers. And, don't forget to reach out to the "other half" of the workplace—the families of your employees; include them often at corporate celebrations, so that support for your organization runs deep. And, finally, never assume your top performers will remain; keep up the drum beat, and make them proud to be a part of the best company the industry has to offer.