



By Tom L. Willis, PCAM

Tom is the Owner of Association Bridge, LLC, dedicated to creating spaces where community association leaders and the professionals who serve them can successfully navigate the challenges they face, reach the goals they choose, find satisfaction and joy in their service, and make raving fans of association members.

# Culture IS THE KEY TO Retention

## Turnover is Expensive!

The struggle to attract and keep talented employees and volunteers is universal. For businesses, the hard cost of employee turnover includes hiring and onboarding, initial training, ongoing development, and integration with the team. Finally, it includes the interim costs incurred while a position is unfilled. Yet, soft costs can be far more impactful. Turnover loads a burden on the backs of everyone in a company. These can turn into hard costs with loss of business due to poor performance.

Not-for-profit community associations have different metrics. On-site staff and volunteer turnover result in soft costs such as service gaps and overburdened remaining staff and volunteers. This, in turn, takes a toll on member satisfaction. Increased stress and pressure result. Over time, this can lead to increased turnover and lack of volunteer interest.

Another common and insidious cost of turnover can be an intentional or unintentional lack of investment in employees and volunteers, which inevitably leads to more turnover.

The vicious cycle of churn is costly. And it sucks - it sucks the life out of organizations of every sort.

## Strategies

There are plenty of strategies out there to retain employees and volunteers. Google the subject and you'll find scads of them. They range from simple recognition to the adoption of lofty ideals designed to motivate the troops. Volunteer retainage is its own animal because compensation is defined differently. In all cases, strategies are focused on showing appreciation and providing benefits that are designed to reward people and keep them in the fold. And they might not work.

Don't get me wrong, many strategies can be beneficial. They may help keep some folks around for a while. But they cannot stand alone. Strategies need to be part of a broader context to have lasting value.

## Want Retention? Engage

Retention is a useful metric, but it's not a goal. It's a byproduct. According to a 2018 Gallup poll, 53% of U.S. workers are not engaged. Gallup states, "They may be generally satisfied but are not cognitively and emotionally connected to their work and workplace; they will usually show up to work and do the minimum required but will quickly leave their company for a slightly better offer." Another 13% were reported to be "actively disengaged." Yikes!

In their seminal work *The Leadership Challenge*, Kouzes and Posner conclude that people tend to look at their jobs in one of 3 ways; as a job, as a career, or as a calling. The difference? Engagement. The higher the level of the synchronization between the work someone does and their values and goals, the deeper the engagement.

## Want Engagement? Lead

*"Engagement is not an HR issue. It is a leadership issue" – Simon Sinek, Author & Organizational Consultant*

If the key to engagement is the connection of values and work, it begs a couple of questions. What does your organization stand for? What deeper connection does it offer? This is where many leaders fail. Kouzes and Posner offer an approach to address this. They boil it down to what they call "The Five Practices of Exemplary Leadership:"

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- Model the Way
- Inspire a Shared Vision
- Challenge the Process
- Enable Others to Act
- Encourage the Heart

Putting this all together, what are the leaders of an organization charged with doing? They develop and nurture organizational culture.

## Build an Intentional Culture – Defining the Organizational “We”

Culture is who we are, proven by what we repeatedly do. Its engine is the shared values of the organization. Shared values lead to aspirational vision. The vision drives goals, which sets the mission. Goals and mission drive strategies, which then dictate day-to-day tactics. We do what we do because we are who we are.


All organizations have a culture. Leaders are responsible for making it an intentional one. That includes community association volunteer leaders. It's not easy, but it is always worth it. Leaving it to chance leads to disconnected strategies and tactics. And churn.

*“Culture eats strategy for breakfast” – Peter Drucker, Legendary Management Educator*

As the stewards of intentional culture, leaders must make sure that

what we do stays in line with who we are. They must walk the talk. Disconnects must be addressed. Few things cause disengagement more quickly than an organization that espouses values that are violated in the way things are done. A dedication to a values-driven culture draws like-minded persons and engages them. Engaged people not only tend to stay awhile, but they also draw others who will find a satisfying place in the culture.

*“Culture is caught, not taught” – Rolf Crocker, CEO, OMNI Community Management, LLC*

External rewards without engagement are like a fence. Engagement produces Internal rewards. If you want to keep people in the fold, stop worrying so much about the fence. Instead, build a fire of culture at the center of the organization. That fire gives team members light so they can see the vision and the warmth of shared values and mission. Create a space where people are drawn and want to stay. 

### Recommended Study Material:

*The Leadership Challenge, 5th Edition by James Kouzes & Barry Posner*

*The Excellence Dividend, by Tom Peters*

*Gung Ho!, by Ken Blanchard & Sheldon Bowles*

*The Culture Engine, by S. Chris Edmonds*

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