

DON'T BECOME A TALEN FARM

(FOR YOUR CIVIL ENGINEERING COMPETITORS)

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By Landon Blake

Introduction

At a recent chapter meeting of my state's land surveying association, every single public and private organization in attendance was looking to hire skilled land surveyors. This is one of many current signs, that in land surveying, we are in an extremely tight labor market.

My goal for this article is to share a lesson I've learned from my employment at multiple civil engineering firms. I'd like to start with a couple of short stories that highlight the topic for this message: how to avoid becoming a talent farm for your competitors.

Both stories involve land surveyors that recently left their employer to start new career opportunities.

This failure is more common with employees that join the organization at a low-level position. The failure becomes more dangerous the longer the employee is

working at the organization.

The First Story

The first story is about a protégé of mine. He spent several years with me at a civil engineering and land surveying firm in the California Central Valley. I recruited him right out of college and devoted time and energy teaching him as much as I could about land surveying. This protégé made rapid progress, and after a few years become a licensed land surveyor. One thing that made this protégé special for me was his ambition, moral integrity, and his knack for understanding business. There was no doubt in my mind he was a future leader of his firm.

Sadly, after almost a decade with his employer, my protégé made a switch to a Sacramento engineering firm. I saw in his exist a similar pattern of my own exit from the very same firm 5 years ago. This pattern included a failure by the management team to recognize the level of

professional growth that had occurred, the corresponding lack of competitive compensation, and a failure to provide this team member with a clear path to leadership within the organization.

The Second Story

The second story is about a long-time friend and peer of mine. He recently walked away from a partnership in a small civil engineering and land surveying firm to become a partner at another Central Valley civil engineering company. This exit left the small civil engineering firm with no licensed surveyor. Why did this traumatic exit (at a high-level of the organization) occur?

The same pattern from my first example is again evident. This land surveyor started his career in surveying at the small firm. There was a failure by the civil engineering partner to recognize the level of growth in the licensed land surveyor. There was inadequate compensation considering his skill set and contribution to profit at the company. There was no clear leadership transition in place.

In both these stories the land surveyors involved obtained a large increase in their compensation package and a marked improvement in their working conditions.

Both of these civil engineering firms had become talent farms for their competitors.

They were making large investments in the training and mentoring of these surveyors, but failing to lock down the returns of those investments in the long-term.

Common Mistakes of Talent Farms

In the two examples I provided, I identified a pattern that talent farms in civil engineering and land surveying commonly make. Let's restate those for clarity:

1] Talent farms fail to recognize the professional growth their employees have made. This failure is more common with employees that join the organization at a low-level position. The failure becomes more dangerous the longer the employee is working at the organization.

2] Talent farms fail to fairly compensate their mid-level talent. These are employees that have moved well beyond the entry level, but who are not yet owners of the firm. This includes senior project managers. I would place in this group any licensed professionals (especially those who are salaried and not hourly).

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3] Talent farms fail to make a place for future leaders. This failure often has two components. The first component is a failure to craft and communicate individualized leadership plans for key team members. The second is a broader failure to plan and communicate the broader leadership transition plan for the organization as a whole.

4] Talent farms fail to fairly compensate their mid-level talent.

3 Best Practices To Avoid Becoming A Talent Farm

Employee retention is complication and has multiple facets. However, what 3 best practices can help your civil engineering or land surveying organization avoid becoming a talent farm?

1] Design and execute a plan to regularly evaluate the professional growth of all your employees. This should be done on at least once a year.

2] Monitor the mileposts in the professional growth of your team members. Obtaining certifications and licenses are very important mileposts. Ask yourself if these mileposts merit an increase in compensation or another form of recognition. (I obtained my land surveying license in California and Nevada, as well as my Certified Federal Surveyor Certificate, all

without a bump in compensation.)

3] Identify your key team members and sit down with them to tailor a professional development plan. Explain to them how they can align their professional goals with your organization's purpose and strategy. Set goals. Update these professional development plans at least once a year. Make sure the team member gets to participate in these updates. Show your team member how you will help support their professional growth and don't be a hypocrite. Keep your promises.

Extra Bit: Questions That Can Help You Assess The Financial Impact of A Key Team Member Departure

The following questions can help your management team assess the financial impact of a key team member departure. Use these questions when you regularly review your compensation packages:

1] What would it cost us to replace this team member in the current labor market?

"Talent farms fail to fairly compensate their mid-level talent."

2] What would the costs be to train a similarly skilled team member on our company processes and culture?

3] How does this team member increase the value of other team members? Is this reflected in the compensation package?

4] What external data have we used to confirm that we are paying this team member competitively?

5] Why might this team member leave for another organization? Are there unique turnover risks with this team member that we have failed to consider?

6] What steps have we taken to support the professional growth of this team member? Have we clearly and regularly communicated that this team member has a future with our organization?

7] What value would our competitor gain if this team member joined their organization tomorrow? What capabilities or client relationships would that competitor gain? What would be the potential financial damage to our organization from this?

Conclusion

Take good care of your people.
Communicate about the future regularly.
Pay fairly. If you don't do these things, someone just like me will do them.

Don't become a talent farm for your civil engineering and land surveying competitors.

"Monitor the mileposts in the professional growth of your team members. Ask yourself if these mileposts merit an increase in compensation or another form of recognition."