

How to Retain Director-Level Talent — Making the Grass Greener in Your Organization

Even in a job market that favors the employer, it can be incredibly difficult for organizations to retain mid-level executives. Career-minded professionals move around more than in the past and see value in exposing themselves to different challenges and working cultures.

Is it worth even trying to keep good mid-level talent in such an environment? David Boggs, practice leader of WK Advisors — a Witt/Kieffer division that offers mid-level executive search consulting services — says yes, definitely. Organizations that provide an environment that is conducive to individuals' career growth will, in the end, have better retention rates with valued mid-level executives.

In this interview, Boggs sheds light on best practices in retaining up-and-coming leaders.

Q: Good talent is always hard to find, and retain, but is this particularly true today of director-level talent? What are progressive organizations doing to keep mid-level executives?

Boggs: Anybody who's a good middle-level executive is somebody who is interested in improving, so it's important to keep these kind of people challenged in their work. Give them additional responsibilities or put them on committees or projects that are outside of their area of expertise. Recognize them as strategic thinkers and having valued opinions. Keep them fully engaged in the organization, which provides the challenge they are looking for and sends a signal that they have a bright future if they stay put within the organization. Then, it never hurts to come right out and tell them they are doing a good job — to say, "You are appreciated and we value what you are doing."

Good organizations have a positive culture, one that values people, lets them do new things, and promotes creativity and innovation. This kind of culture gets people excited about their work and allows them to see a bigger picture beyond just their area. Oftentimes these are the same companies that, coincidentally, have the important tangible things that all employees are looking for, such as good pay and benefits.

Q: What traits do you see in organizations who struggle to retain good people at the director level?

Boggs: I think these are organizations that send mixed signals. They may on occasion say that they value people and want to challenge them, but they don't always back it up. Sometimes it's a matter of neglect, just not being on the ball as an organization. Again, good executives are the kind of people who value opportunity and recognition, and it's not always about money or a bonus.

I think these practices are more important today at the director level than they have been. You used to see it at the VP level, but now you have people at other levels who are well supported and looking to work with the organization to eventually move up to the VP level.

Q: What do you say to organizations who say, "We take the time and resources to develop people and then they end up leaving us."

Boggs: There is a long list of really successful organizations whose “alumni” have gone on to excel at other high-level organizations. You can look at it as a kind of compliment — others seeing enough value in your people and organization to try to lure them away. Even if you have great mentoring, development programs, and so forth, you’re still not going to retain all your good people. Hopefully, you will have a healthy balance between internal promotions and new people you bring in from the outside.

Q: Even though they may eventually depart for other organizations, do good directors and mid-level executives expect to be groomed (e.g., through training and mentoring) as an essential condition of their continued tenure?

Boggs: Not yet. It is not at all the norm, so it can be a competitive advantage in retaining good talent. Some potential hires might even be skeptical when they learn about programs to develop and retain them. They just haven’t seen it a lot in other places they’ve worked, so it may surprise them in yours.

Q: Director-level professionals today tend to be more networked (via, for example, LinkedIn), which keeps them in regular contact with headhunters and potential new employers. How should organizations respond to this reality?

Boggs: There is no way you can control it, and some organizations embrace employees who are highly “visible” and connected in their industries. You simply have to position your organization as well as you can, so that when they look outside, the grass doesn’t look greener.

About Witt/Kieffer

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Contact:

David W. Boggs, Practice Leader
WK Advisors - a division of Witt/Kieffer
2000 Warrington Way, Suite 200, Louisville, Kentucky 40222
Phone: 502-228-4030 • Toll Free: 877-228-4030
Email: dboggs@wkadvisors.com