Human beings are social animals, and work is a social institution. Long-term relationships are often formed at work -- networking relationships, friendships, even marriages. In fact, if you did not meet your spouse in college, chances are you met him or her at work. The evolution of quality relationships is very normal and an important part of a healthy workplace. In the best workplaces, employers recognize that people want to forge quality relationships with their coworkers, and that company allegiance can be built from such relationships.

The development of trusting relationships is a significant emotional compensation for employees in today's marketplace. Thus, it is easy to understand why it is such a key trait of retention, and is one of the 12 key discoveries from a multiyear research effort by The Gallup Organization. Our objective was to identify the consistent dimensions of workplaces with high levels of four critical outcomes: employee retention, customer metrics, productivity, and profitability. The research identified 12 dimensions that consistently correlate with these four outcomes -- dimensions Gallup now uses to measure the health of a workplace. An associated research effort, in which Gallup studied more than 80,000 managers, focused on discovering what great managers do to create quality workplaces.
This item -- "I have a best friend at work" -- is clearly one of the most controversial of the 12 traits of highly productive workgroups. In answering this item, many employees do not stumble over the word "friend," because they have many friends at work. Instead, they get stuck on the word "best," because they feel the term implies exclusivity, and they have trouble identifying one "best friend" among their coworkers.

Gallup discovered the power of this item in identifying talented workgroups -- that the strongest agreement occurred in the most productive workgroups. Because some employees had difficulty with the word "best," Gallup went back to those groups and softened the word to "close" or "good," or excluded the word "best" entirely. When this was done, however, the item lost its power to differentiate highly productive workgroups from mediocre workgroups. This suggested that the use of the word "best" actually pinpoints a dynamic of great workgroups.

Gallup also observed that employees who report having a best friend at work were:

- 43% more likely to report having received praise or recognition for their work in the last seven days.
- 37% more likely to report that someone at work encourages their development.
- 35% more likely to report coworker commitment to quality.
- 28% more likely to report that in the last six months, someone at work has talked to them about their progress.
- 27% more likely to report that the mission of their company makes them feel their job is important.
- 27% more likely to report that their opinions seem to count at work.
- 21% more likely to report that at work, they have the opportunity to do what they do best every day.

While companies often pay significant attention to loyalty toward the organization, the best employers recognize that loyalty also exists among employees toward one another. All employees have "leaving moments" when they examine whether to leave or stay at an organization. The best managers in the world observe that the quality and depth of employees' relationships is a critical component of employee loyalty.
This item also points to the issue of trust between coworkers. When strong engagement is felt in a workgroup, employees believe that their coworkers will help them during times of stress and challenge. In this day of rapid-fire change, reorganization, mergers, and acquisitions, having best friends at work may be the true key to effective change integration and adaptation. When compared to those who don't, employees who have best friends at work identify significantly higher levels of healthy stress management, even though they experience the same levels of stress.

In next week's column, we explore Item 11 of 12: "In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress."

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