

Retaining Top Performers

The key to retaining government's best people is knowing what makes them tick: They want to make a difference, and they thrive on complex tasks.

By [Robert J. O'Neill Jr.](#) | April 29, 2009



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Recently I had a conversation with a city manager who was very concerned that he would lose his high performers during the economic downturn. His organization was facing position eliminations, salary freezes and travel restrictions, and he acknowledged that his high performers are sought after and mobile.

My colleague's concerns may be well founded. In the April 2008 issue of ICMA's *PM (Public Management)* magazine, James Svara, a professor at Arizona State University and director of its Center for Urban Innovation, reported that conversations with Generation X and Millennial professionals suggest that these talented individuals "may become frustrated at how long it takes to move up unless they are willing to relocate to another jurisdiction to pursue a new job." Svara noted that retaining many of the Gen X professionals who are likely to be the next managers "could be a challenge, if the right opportunities are not available."

The question then becomes, what can local government leaders do to retain their best and brightest? Since that initial conversation with my colleague, I have reflected on what we know about high performers and concluded that he has many options to recruit and retain high performers in this difficult time.

When you ask high performers what they want in a position and from an organization, you consistently get the same answers. First, they want to make a difference. This is

especially true of those who are drawn to public service and who have an interest in local government. They want to work on the issues that are most important to the community and the organization. They don't want to be permanently tied down to rigid job descriptions, organizational silos and routine tasks. They want to test their creativity, leadership and management skills. The more complex the task the better, which is an ideal approach for tackling the challenges facing local government today.

Second, talented individuals want you to invest in them. They have an insatiable appetite for learning. They want to be more valuable to you, to grow professionally, and to be ready when you call with the next assignment. This means that training and professional development matter a lot to them. While I am not a fan of eliminating training and professional development investments when times are tough, the reality is that many jurisdictions will have to eliminate or scale back in these areas in response to policy mandates and public pressure.

There are many approaches, however, that don't require tuition and travel. Strong mentoring programs, job rotation, interim assignments and participation on organization-wide task forces all give high performers a chance to develop skills, learn about other parts of the organization and continue to grow professionally.

Finally, recognition is important. This one is tricky; typical recognition programs tend to have little impact on high performers. What matters to them is recognition that is personally meaningful. Sometimes it is praise from a mentor, recognition by colleagues and peers, visible recognition by the city council or the county commission, or perhaps an award from a professional organization. There is someone or some group that matters to a high performer, so hold on to that plaque and find out what form of recognition will truly have an impact.

Yes, we should talk about money. It matters. In his article ["Retain Your Top Performers,"](#) best-selling author Marshall Goldsmith cites a "frequent lack of connection between pay and contribution." His research of 2,000 managers from organizations across the spectrum revealed that while many respondents claimed that the difference in contribution between a top performer and a below-average employee was more than 100 percent, the pay differential between the two groups was only 5 to 10 percent.

But while competitive salaries and benefits are important, these things alone are not what retain high performers, particularly those drawn to public service. Consistently,

what keeps these individuals engaged is challenging work through which they can make a difference, organizations willing to involve and invest in them, and recognition from a group or groups of individuals that has meaning to the recipient.

We in local government have a wonderful opportunity to provide all of these things to talented employees, even in difficult times. The jurisdictions that understand the importance of establishing and implementing creative retention programs will fare the best in this challenging economy.