

Rethinking How Employees Are Promoted

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Current strategies could be harming retention and pushing talented employees out the door.



Anna Kim

Employees aren't all vibing with the idea of becoming someone else's boss.

Only one-third of individual contributors in the US want to be a people manager, according to a LinkedIn survey. And some companies are rethinking how they handle promotions, so people management isn't the only option for employees. Shopify, Google, and BP, for instance, started dual-track or two-track promotions, The Hill reported, where employees choose to advance either as a people manager or as a higher-level individual contributor within a company.

Kyle M.K., a talent strategy advisor at Indeed, heard about dual-track promotions in 2017, but they've only recently gained "popularity," he told HR Brew, as companies started looking for creative retention strategies post-pandemic. M.K. said dual-track promotions are often more helpful than traditional promotions, because if employees don't have the desire or skills to lead people, they can't be effective managers.

Retention problems with promotions. When employees become managers, but lack the people skills to be a good manager, it can create retention issues, workplace strategist and author Jennifer Moss told HR Brew.

“Teams suffer because [employees can be] really good at being individual contributors, but terrible at being managers,” Moss said, adding ineffective leaders cause frustration within their entire team.

“It ends up that you lose two or more people. You lose, first of all, that incredible engineer [or] developer that could put a lot of innovation into your product, and then you also lose the members of their team who hate working for them because they’re a terrible manager,” she said.

Managers have also felt more pressure as companies reduced their workforces and expected them to produce more with fewer resources, Moss said, and that can make employees feel “punished” for becoming a manager.

Since a lot of individual contributors already don’t want to be managers, M.K. said, and there aren’t many opportunities for career growth without leading people, it pushes employees to leave.

“The things that hold them back from staying with a company is that they start to plateau in terms of their compensation, or their ownership, or influence over the business, or their team,” M.K. said. “If we hit that stage psychologically with the job that we currently have, and there’s no more challenges, then we start to look elsewhere.”

Look for Ted Lasso for promotions. When considering dual-track promotions, M.K. said HR teams need guidelines on what’s expected to become a people manager and higher-level contributor. For instance, potential people managers need some “essential skills,” Moss said, like being empathetic, engaging in active listening, and measuring employee job satisfaction. Most companies already have a management training “deficit,” M.K. said, so every new and existing people manager needs emotional intelligence skills training.

For manager promotions, M.K. recommends that HR look for the “Ted Lassos” in their company—based on the Apple TV+ series where a US football coach with no experience coaching soccer leads a European soccer team. These employees may not be the highest performer or the best contributor, he said, but they typically keep morale up and inspire peers to do their best work.

Higher-level contributor promotions, M.K. said, should be for employees who want more “ownership or influence” over a product, service, or area of the business without having direct reports.

HR can slowly introduce dual-track promotions through test pilots within certain departments, Moss recommends. Start small and see how it impacts job satisfaction among employees, she said, then HR can use results to advocate for organizational change.

Dual-track promotions are “one of the best things” HR can do for employees, M.K. said, especially in tandem with a skills-first hiring approach. These promotions consider employees from a variety of skills and potential levels outside of their current role, he said, which helps improve retention.

“It is all centered around keeping that institutional knowledge, institutional, within the four walls of the business. It’s there to attract a lot of talent, saying, ‘Hey, whenever you start here, we’ve got lots of different opportunities,’” he said. “This really will help a lot of employers keep some of the best talent that they’ve got who are looking for those new challenges, new ways to influence, and new things to own.”