



**L-R: DeDe Watkins, Senior Manager, Training and Development; Jim Garman, Chief Human Resources Officer; Lori Partain, Manager, Training and Development**

# Engineering Employee Retention

**Keeping business strategy in sight, Carter & Burgess creates a turnover turnaround.**

The architects and engineers at Carter & Burgess have designed everything from a shopping center at Ramstein Air Force Base in Germany to a helicopter maintenance facility in Georgia to the Dallas-Fort Worth National Cemetery. Yet, they were also quitting.

In 2006, the firm found itself with an annual employee turnover rate of 28 percent; most of those who were leaving were in their first two years of employment with the firm. Employees had grown dissatisfied with managers who were highly competent in terms of technical know-how, but who faced challenges in the area of management skills.

“At a professional services firm, the key element really is the people,” says

Jim Garman, chief human resources officer. “We had high turnover and empty chairs, which was really affecting revenue.”

In addition, the company’s 30 offices had been acting as individual fiefdoms—each addressing training and development needs in their own way. They were paying retail for services that had little or no connection to corporate strategy; costs were high, and results were inconsistent.

All of that has since changed, as the firm has taken radical steps to create a learning culture for all of its more than 3,000 employees. Training and development became centralized as a corporate function under Garman, who was hired in 2005.

One hundred percent of employees have access to individual development plans, defined sets of competencies for their jobs, and learning activities that feed into annual performance evaluations. The firm offers formal learning activities, mentoring and

coaching, knowledge sharing, job aids, and on-the-job learning to all employees through Garman and his four-person staff.

The firm implemented human resources minimum standards, required of all managers to ensure commitment to best practices in hiring, communication, performance planning, and training and development—a total of 22 elements in all. Garman’s team provides tools, training, and resources to help managers learn and execute the minimum standards, and internal coaching and consulting services in areas of special need.

In an initiative that broadened the effect of learning across the organization to support business objectives, the firm launched “Foundations of People Management.” Directed at all current and prospective managers, the program includes such components as a communication-style inventory, pre-reading, 14 hours of classroom instruction, action

learning and planning, and follow-up coaching. It was delivered regionally, two or three offices at a time, to more than 700 managers in all 30 offices across the United States.

“We know that people’s most important relationship at work is with their managers,” says Garman. “As a result of this program, we have seen increased employee satisfaction with key metrics, including manager communication and local management.”

The high turnover had another negative effect on the firm: a very lean leadership pipeline. The learning and development staff implemented a leadership development program that is championed by the CEO, who hand-selects 44 participants each year. Featuring innovative learning concepts, the program promotes learning as a journey and includes

- 360-degree assessment
- extensive class prework
- a two-day classroom session
- a one-on-one executive coaching session conducted four months later
- a self-assessment of progress completed one month after the coaching
- a one-day classroom “reunion” to share learning and successes one month after the self-assessment.

The program was popular and successful, but it depended on a degree of intimacy that made it difficult to expand to larger audiences. Wanting to reach more people, the learning staff developed and implemented an innovative self-paced leadership program.

It features exclusive online courses on leadership topics accessible through a simple, easy-to-use interface; a leadership qualities self-assessment and action plan; targeted leadership development opportunities, including on-the-job, cross-functional projects; and structured coaching by the participants’ supervisor. The program targeted 350 employees last year—more than 10 percent of the company.

Garman notes that every learning and development effort at Carter & Burgess is aligned with the business

strategy. The firm is a major federal contractor; therefore, employees must complete annual compliance training, as well as continuing professional education to maintain their licenses.

The training and development team works with office leaders to determine learning and performance initiative needs. The team conducts an annual needs analysis, using exit-interview data as well as information from focus groups and stakeholders. Opportunities are then offered on a menu basis to the leaders of the 30 offices.

“We use a ‘pull’ approach, letting offices determine their training needs based on their specific business needs,” explains DeDe Watkins, senior manager of training and development. “Office leaders review the offerings and decide which programs they will invest in. We monitor their usage of the training and consult with them on their office training strategy and delivery.”

Despite the centralization, Carter & Burgess still believes that training and development is an individual responsibility. To underscore this, and to highlight the many new opportunities that had been developed, the training and development team launched an innovative branded program called “Get Growing.”

Each employee received a desktop planter with grass seed and an email directing them to the new learning portal. It provides a gateway to a wealth of training opportunities, including online courses, both live and electronic performance support, classroom and virtual-classroom sessions, self-study resources, and more. Employees have responded enthusiastically, completing more than 18,000 hours of e-learning and more than 18,000 hours of instructor-led training.

Does the firm see evidence that its efforts are effective? Turnover is down by 10 percent and is approaching the industry average of 15 percent. Further, Garman notes the increased retention of high-potential employees. Employee satisfaction with training and development is also up 12 percent.

**“We know that people’s most important relationship at work is with their managers. As a result of [the Foundations of People Management program], we have seen increased employee satisfaction with key metrics, including manager communication and local management.”**

–Jim Garman

Chief Human Resources Officer,  
Carter & Burgess

Centralization has also helped to decrease costs. Whereas individual offices had previously been sourcing their own technical training and paying retail prices, a firmwide commitment to a single external vendor, and the bulk purchase of discounted licenses has resulted in a savings of more than 34 percent in the first year.

To ensure sustainability of organizational results, the training and development team has implemented a systematic process to identify the performance and potential of key leaders in the organization. The team works to identify development activities and to ensure that development resources are available.

The team also designed a team talent management process to be implemented by managers. Through it, managers identify their employees’ readiness for career advancement, performance rating, potential, and development needs. Since the implementation of the process, employee satisfaction with promotional opportunities has increased by 9 percent. **T+D**



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