

Traditional reward systems based on one's position do not work in today's organizations. Instead, organizations are redefining what makes up a successful career. Everyone needs to openly acknowledge that upward growth may have nothing to do with an employee's worth.

Some employers are hesitant to display this honestly, fearing that employees will become discouraged. In fact, the opposite usually occurs. Employees who are dealt with honestly talk about their relief once they understand what they have been experiencing. Rather than withdrawing, they work with their employers to develop "win-win" ventures, such as creating new recognition systems and fostering ongoing employee growth opportunities.

Embrace lateral growth

One option is for employers to encourage and develop lateral growth paths such as non-managerial career paths and interdepartmental transfers. Both are well suited to employees with technical and professional backgrounds. Employees continue to learn and use new information, systems and tasks. Rewards are based on the employee's ability to strengthen the organization by learning new aspects of the business. For example, companies with team-based work units may measure the value of employees by the number and variety of teams to which they contribute, not by the title or length of tenure. Salary increases would reflect an employee's depth of ability, knowledge, and versatility.

Focus on learning opportunities

Another option is for employees to "grow in place" through the provision of ongoing training programs, sabbaticals, and study leaves. These continued learning opportunities provide the challenge employees seek while maintaining the organization's competitive position. For example, school boards offer deferred salary leaves that might see an employee distribute four years of salary over a five-year time period and then take one of the years for personal use. The time may be used for further study, but most often it is used as a rejuvenation period to travel, pursue hobby interests or try alternate careers.

Foster the sharing of knowledge

A further option lies in the acceptance that growth may not have to be experienced directly by the employee, but may involve contributing to the growth of a colleague. Veteran and highly skilled workers may be very happy with their own positions, yet experience great satisfaction from sharing their knowledge with less seasoned peers. The role of mentor and coach can be given prestige through formal recognition and monetary reward.

Plateauing exists, and the first step in dealing with it is to acknowledge it. The second step is to be willing to dismantle the rigid structures we have relied on for so many years. The third is to develop creative reward systems based on employee growth and contribution. The reality is there just aren't enough corners in our buildings to reward all of our talented people with corner offices.