

7 Ways to Reduce Turnover

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The majority of U.S. professional public safety employees work at the local level, where government bodies are responsible for financial oversight. Public safety agencies and departments often operate with strict and inflexible budgets determined largely by money collected from the local tax base or through municipal fees. Spending earmarked for law enforcement, fire, emergency medical services, and emergency management agencies is often cut, or redirected to other projects, as part of local budget planning.

Given these unstable resources, the cost of turnover of public safety employees is a difficult challenge to overcome. Retirements and resignations may constitute the largest percentage of turnover, but staff attrition also can come from employees transferring to another agency or department, or simply leaving the industry. Recent reports are drawing attention to the need for better understanding, planning, and budgeting for turnover before it wreaks havoc on public safety services.

Putting the brakes on turnover

Retaining highly-skilled employees is a top priority for most agencies and departments. Inflexible budgets leave little room for financial incentives, but pay and benefits are not always the main contributor to employees choosing to leave. According to a study conducted by the Saratoga Institute in California, in which approximately 20,000 people leaving their current employment at business organizations were surveyed, 88 percent stated that they were leaving their job for a reason other than pay. Among the reasons that people left their businesses were having an unclear perception of the demands of the job, feeling under-appreciated, or lacking faith in senior leadership were the top motivating factors. Below are some ways your department can decrease turnover.

1 It starts with hiring

Plant the seeds of reduced turnover during the hiring process. Television depictions of the life of a police officer, firefighter, or EMT often paint unrealistic expectations of the job, so some applicants may find that they are not mentally prepared for the reality of the challenges they will face. Clear and accurate descriptions of all aspects of employee roles can provide applicants with sufficient explanation of their duties and set the correct expectations up front.

Clear and accurate
job descriptions

Motivate the team

Public safety jobs tend to attract people who are motivated by helping their community through challenging work, and building on this pays dividends. First, supervisors can overcome the morale issues that lead to attrition by clearly stating the unique mission and goals of their agencies and departments to develop a team identity. Next, consistent and transparent communication shows that everyone is equally valued and that there are no in-groups or out-groups. Finally, lead by example and hold everyone accountable, including supervisors, to show that no one is above the team.

Everyone is
equally valued

Invest in people

Make sure that your people have the tools they need to do their jobs effectively and safely. In addition, provide ongoing opportunities for professional growth to ensure that they feel valued. While some organizations fear that this will make their employees more attractive to other departments and that they will subsequently leave, the reality is that people who feel like they're stagnant or undervalued are more likely to look for employment elsewhere.

Provide opportunities
for growth

Show them the ropes

Mentoring programs have been useful in reducing turnover and can provide additional benefits for all involved. Veteran employees involved in the mentoring of new recruits may stay longer because they have a personal investment in teaching and training a new generation of first responders. Additionally, younger employees get to share best practices in new technology with the older generation. The mentoring program therefore adds a layer of cohesion, trust, and understanding to a team that fosters a culture that employees are often reluctant to leave.

Make a culture worth
staying for

Reward the high-performers

Promotion processes should be outlined and based, at least partly, on merit, with skill sets required to advance within the service clearly defined. Promotion based on seniority makes sense in a profession that values experience, but not all senior public safety employees get necessary training to prepare them to properly manage an agency or department. A well-defined and comprehensive development plan for all managers can help ensure that anyone is properly trained to lead.

Have a well-defined
promotion plan

Work-life balance

Offering an agreeable work-life balance can do much to make employees want to stay attached to your department. All employees need time away from work, but they also need to be able to mentally unplug when they're off-duty. Departments should review operational practices, such as shift schedules, distribution of duties, and on-call policies to ensure that each employee has the opportunity to recharge physically and mentally.

Everyone needs to
recharge

Attitude of innovation

Attitudes toward innovation can become a wedge between senior leadership and young professionals. In public safety services steeped in tradition, leaders may be inclined to shun new ideas, frustrating those trying to better the service through the introduction and use of new technology. To work through skepticism of new technologies and methods, rely on colleagues in other agencies and departments to provide the scoop. This can help build trust in new products and services and possibly prevent the organization from investing in an ineffective or ill-fitting resource.

Be open to new ideas



On the best of days, public safety jobs can be difficult, dangerous, and demanding. While budgets may remain inflexible, supervisors and hiring practices can become flexible enough to lower the likelihood of employee attrition. Encouraging new ideas, setting clear expectations, and engaging in fair personnel policies can be significant in building and maintaining a happy, well-balanced department.

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