

# **Five key leader behaviors that keep your best staff on your team**

By David F. Smith, PhD (unpublished)

Every person in a medical practice, including the physician-owner, medical director, office manager, lab technicians—everyone—has some thought of quitting their work. The thoughts may be pervasive or momentary, and action may be imminent or a “me – never”. This range is called in social science literature “voluntary turnover intention” (VTI). Each person in the medical practice has a level of VTI that varies over time and is measurable. More importantly, good practice leaders can keep the level low through certain specific and learnable relations-oriented behaviors.

Leaders who want to keep their best people should exhibit these behaviors soften and authentically. An example of not-so-good leadership will put this in context. Morgan is the office manager of a thriving five-partner practice. Alex is the main scheduler and is a hard worker, dedicated to keeping the schedule filled, adding to the practice’s profits through the efficient balancing of the schedule. Morgan believes Alex is happy at work, never complaining, always on time, well...except lately. Alex quit today, giving notice to a surprised Morgan that another practice offered Alex a position.

Why was Morgan surprised? How did this dysfunctional outcome come to be? The bottom line is that Morgan was not aware of Alex’s level of VTI, which rose to the high end of the scale resulting in the intention to voluntarily quit becoming the action of quitting. Five Star Leadership® research suggests that if Morgan had implemented five leader behaviors awhile back this problem could have been avoided if it was avoidable.

These five behaviors are Inclusion, Respect, Reward, Improvement, and Modeling. Academics may use different terms for these behaviors (Yukl, 2013); these terms are used as they have been found to better describe actual leader practices. Before each of these is described along with techniques for implementation, a better definition of their goal is needed. These behaviors accomplish much more than lowering employee VTI and thus reducing turnover.

The behaviors affect a range of outcomes including higher productivity, greater participation by employees in extra-role tasks, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and a feeling of being treated fairly. How do these behaviors accomplish so much? They affect a variable called Leader-member Exchange quality (LMX). Think of LMX as the health of the relationship between a leader and a follower.

In the example above, the LMX relationship between Morgan and Alex likely was of low quality given the surprise departure. LMX is a one-on-one relationship. If Morgan has four other direct reports, then there are four more LMX relationships, totaling five distinct LMX relationships for Morgan to keep in mind. The reason LMX is important is that positive outcomes (e.g. low turnover, high productivity, low alcohol and drug-related problems) are associated strongly with high-quality LMX. Conversely, low-quality LMX is strongly related to negative outcomes (e.g. turnover, disruptive employee actions, work mistakes, absenteeism).

So, following the bouncing ball, if practice leaders want more positive outcomes, fewer negative outcomes, then they should act to strengthen the LMX relationships they have with subordinates. The five behaviors, when implemented correctly, consistently, and authentically increase LMX quality. Correctly means understanding what the behavior is, how to use it, and apply it individually with each worker they lead.

Consistency means making these behaviors a part of the day-to-day way of leading. Authentically means believing that the set of behaviors is a positive way to work with employees to help accomplish organizational goals.

Perhaps none of this is surprising; keep in mind an understanding of the parts and how they relate brings a consciousness of the importance of these five leadership behaviors.