

Want Happier Professors? Try Being Nice

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When it comes to keeping tenured professors content in their jobs, you can catch more flies with honey than you can with big faculty-focused strategic initiatives, a new study suggests.

The study, based on survey data from more than 3,600 recently tenured associate professors at doctoral universities, found that their organizational commitment hinged far more on whether they believed they worked in a caring, supportive environment than on their sense that administrators had undertaken broad efforts to support the faculty.

"Organizations that cultivate a climate of support will, on average, exhibit higher levels of commitment than those that focus on external policies and procedures," says a paper summarizing the study's results.

Among its more striking conclusions, the study found that race- and ethnicity-linked gaps in organizational commitment disappeared when the study examined only associate professors who felt equally that their immediate work environment was supportive.

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Cautioning that lower-ranking faculty members might care more about broad organizational efforts than did the population examined, the paper nonetheless argues that "all initiatives are not created equally." It urges colleges to stop taking "a kitchen-sink approach to reducing employee turnover and improving levels of organizational commitment," especially considering the costs involved.

The study's results bode well for colleges and other organizations with limited funds, the paper says. Improving how employees treat each other requires fewer financial resources "than strategic initiatives, such as hiring a greater number of faculty from diverse backgrounds, installing intensive mentorship programs, and investing additional resources in interdisciplinary activities."

The Value of 'People People'

Andy Brantley, president of the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, examined the paper and said its conclusions ring true based on the observations of people in his field. While broader strategic efforts may affect employees only indirectly, every employee is directly, personally affected by the culture of their workplace, he said.

"It is the degree to which I want to come into work every day. It is the degree to which I want to interact with other people. It is the degree to which I want to feel part of the larger organization," Mr. Brantley said.

In today's work environment, Mr. Brantley said, "there really is no excuse for behavior that is not supportive."

"It all boils down to the degree to which we hold managers at the department level accountable for creating a respectful, inclusive, collegial environment," Mr. Brantley said. "None of us should be able to get away with saying 'I am not a people person' or 'that is not my preferred mode of interaction with others.'"

Jeraul C. Mackey, a doctoral student in education at Harvard University, conducted the study using data from an annual survey of tenure-stream faculty members done by the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education. His analysis focused on responses provided by associate professors at 50 universities surveyed during

the academic years 2010-11 to 2014-15. All of his subjects had received tenure within the past six years.

Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multiracial professors — members of minority groups that colleges generally regard as underrepresented — accounted for a total of 12 percent of Mr. Mackey's sample. Among its limitations, the study relied on data from people who had volunteered to be surveyed, rather than a randomly selected population, and was unable to track changes in respondents' perceptions over time.

Limiting Turnover

To measure associate professors' perceptions of whether they worked in a supportive environment, Mr. Mackey examined how much they agreed with the statements about department colleagues being collegial, pitching in when needed, and letting them balance a career with personal and family obligations. Also considered was how much they agreed with the statements "My institution's priorities are stated consistently" and "The chief academic officer at my institution seems to care about the quality of life for faculty of my rank."

To measure such professors' perceptions of whether their university's policies, practices, and procedures sought to improve the climate throughout the organization, the study examined their level of agreement with statements such as: "Interdisciplinary work is rewarded in the merit and promotion process." "There is effective mentoring of pre-tenure and tenured associate professors in my department." "My department is successful at retaining high-quality faculty members and addressing substandard tenured faculty performance." "There is visible leadership at my institution for the support and promotion of diversity on campus."

Upon analyzing the correlation between professors' responses to such survey questions and their responses to survey questions intended to gauge their organizational commitment, Mr. Mackey found that professors who had even a slightly positive view of their work climate were more likely to want to stay in their jobs. The study's results suggest "that enhancing employee-supportive dimensions of workplace climate is 11 times more effective than improving strategic-focused aspects of climate in terms of organizational commitment," his paper says.

Kiernan Mathews, executive director of the Collaborative on Academic Careers in Higher Education, described Mr. Mackey's use of its survey data as novel and said such research "will help give college leaders the leverage they need to effect change in faculty cultures around the academy."

In an interview, Mr. Mackey cautioned that his results might have been different had he focused on junior faculty members who had not yet received tenure and, presumably, were concerned with how their institution's policies and practices would affect their chances of advancement.

Mr. Mackey also acknowledged that improving workplace climates can be a complex task. He said, "To tell associate professors 'This is how to be a good colleague,' that might be easier said than done."

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