

Emotional Intelligence: The Key to Staff Retention

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LD 850 Leadership Integrated Capstone

Granite State College

July 26, 2021

Table of Contents

Acknowledgements -----	3
Abstract -----	4
Introduction -----	5
Literature Review-----	6
Retention-----	6
Transformational Leadership-----	8
Emotional Intelligence-----	9
Framework for Analysis-----	10
Appreciative Inquiry Approach-----	10
Methods-----	12
Results-----	13
Discussion/Analysis-----	13-14
References-----	15-16
Appendix A (Interview #1) -----	17
Appendix B (Interview #2) -----	18
Appendix C (Interview #3) -----	19
Appendix D (Interview #4) -----	20
Appendix E (Interview #5) -----	21
Appendix F (Interview #6) -----	22

Acknowledgements

I'd like to thank all of the Granite State College staff that have helped me along my academic journey and provided me with support.

I'd like to thank my parents who have always supported me in all of my endeavors and always made sure I knew they were proud of me.

I'd like to thank my dog Leo, who always waited patiently to go on adventures, while I finished my homework.

Abstract

This paper intends to make a case that leaders with emotional intelligence are the key to maintaining good employees using two primary resources both academic journals and employee questionnaires completed by non-profit area agency staff. This literature review will make a compelling argument that emotional intelligence in leaders is a pertinent characteristic when determining the cause behind staff retention. It will conclude with ways in which leaders can learn emotional intelligence and use that knowledge to ensure job satisfaction and strengthen staff retention.

Keywords: transformational leadership, emotional intelligence, retention

Emotional Intelligence: The Key to Staff Retention

Introduction

This paper intends to make a case that leaders with emotional intelligence are the key to maintaining good employees. This paper will entail the description of emotional intelligence and how it is applied in leadership roles. It will also comprise of delving into staff retention, motivation, job satisfaction and brief breakdown of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. It will go on to provide ways to retain good employees by first detailing some of the root causes of employee turnover. The paper will conclude with evidence of staff retention as a key to success for employee retention.

Emotional intelligence is an ambiguous term and can be carried out in various ways with many varying factors. To be able to formalize research both current and historical, will ascertain the purpose of this paper to be true.

In the field of Human Services, most specifically the field of intellectual and developmental disabilities, there is a significant staffing crisis. “The current state of the DSP workforce has been called a crisis, but some argue that the current situation is far too predictable and persistent to be considered a crisis any longer; experts have called it a systemic failure of the long-term services and support system” (Johnson, et. al., 2021, p. 204). However, this statement is not only applicable to DSP’s (Direct Support Professionals), but all departments across agencies throughout NH are experiencing a staffing shortages.

While the work in itself is difficult and the wage leaves much to be desired, there are individuals who choose to stay in the field for many years, often the same agency, so why is that? This leads me to believe there is something that calls people to stay, even in tough times. If I can

hone in on these factors, would agencies be able to implement them in all areas of the agency; or better yet, do it better?

I am currently the Case Management Supervisor for adults with developmental disabilities. Prior to me being in my role on January 1, 2020, I held a position in the same department as a Senior Case Manager and Assistant Supervisor. The case management department alone was experiencing turnover approximately every two months. I understood from being in these roles myself, why people were leaving. The burnout and pay was just a couple of reasons. But was it everything? Granted, we have fought to increase the pay for our case managers since that time. Was that the key? The work is still difficult and emotionally tolling, case managers could likely get similar compensation at a less stressful job. So why have they stayed for the past two years? There must be more to it. While I won't be interviewing individuals whom I supervise, my intent is to get other individuals who have been at the agency for a minimum of 5 years to give me some insight on why they stay. I will be using the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach in hopes of understanding how people feel, think and behave to determine the efficacy of what the agency is doing well. By using the appreciative inquiry approach I hope to focus on the things the agency does well, I can in turn take that information to create a program that strengthens these factors in all departments across the agency (Davis, 2021).

Literature Review

Retention

Employee motivation is a driving factor that can greatly increase staff retention. "Employee motivation refers to the effort made to achieve organizational goals (Sabbagha, pg.1)." Motivation is a conditioned behavior by the leader's ability to satisfy an employee's need.

Aside from the employee's motivation, there are intrinsic and extrinsic factors that play a role in an employee's motivation.

Intrinsic motivation is used to describe employees who do not need external rewards to feel motivated in their work, these individuals feel motivated by the actual work itself and that work is rewarding to them. Individuals who need extrinsic motivation are not motivated by the work itself; they either have a fear of repercussion or need to feel that they are either praised for their work or paid adequately (which could include bonuses, etc.). The type of motivation required for individuals could vary from job to job (Sabbagha, 2018).

One individual may work at a place for many years and not find fulfillment in the work that they do, however, may stay because the pay is exceptional. If this individual were to find a job that they found great pleasure in, they may be willing to take a pay cut. These two motivational factors (extrinsic and intrinsic) are not black and white, but knowing what motivates an employee is the start to understanding how to keep them.

Employee retention is a move made by an organization used to keep employees for the foreseeable future. The organization creates policies that focus on a mutually beneficial for as long as the relationship continues to be mutually beneficial. "Retention factors include training and development, supervisor support, career opportunities, job characteristics (which included skill variety, job autonomy, and job challenge), work/life balance, and compensation" (Sabbagha, pg. 2). It is important to identify, how as an individual in a leadership role, can strengthen or create these opportunities for their employees.

Human Services agencies depend on the quality of their employees, as their primary role is their human interaction. Their success is dependent on obtaining and retaining quality staff.

These agencies are significantly dependent on the availability of qualified employees (Ewalt, 1991).

Transformational Leadership

“Characteristics of transformational leadership include instilling pride and motivation, sharing vision for the organization, providing staff direction in attaining organizational goals, and demonstrating openness to staff input and ideas” (Kleinman, pg. 3, 2014). Emotional intelligence and autonomy play a significant role in transformational leadership. Waglay, Becker, and du Plessis state “The current study argues that emotional intelligence is not always universally researched or acknowledged as a key attribute used by leaders to gauge followers’ emotions” (pg. 2, 2020). Their study argues that emotional intelligence is a key ingredient in the format of high-quality leader member exchange (LMX) relationships. Leaders provide a strong emotional attachment to their employees and many authors argue that emotional intelligence is a significant attribute in transformational leadership.

Many will argue that transformational leaders are more effective than transactional leaders due to their concern in regard to their followers and they do this by utilizing higher levels of emotional intelligence. There are four I’s noted in transformational leadership that overlap with the qualities of leaders with emotional intelligence. They are as follows: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individual consideration. “The relationship between transformational leadership and job performance is mediated by emotional intelligence” (Wager, 2020, pg. 3).

The research in this academic journal supports that emotional intelligence is in fact a key factor in effective leadership and building meaningful relationships at work. Historical research done previous also substantiates that emotional intelligence is considered an important

contributor in explaining leadership effectiveness. Results from this research place the emotional intelligence at the core of strong leader member relationships and job performance. “Implicitly, one would expect that transformational leaders make use of emotional intelligence to build high-quality relationships with followers; however, this has not been tested formally in the applied setting” (Wager, 2020, pg. 9).

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence can be described as “Emotional intelligence (otherwise known as emotional quotient or EQ) is the ability to understand, use, and manage your own emotions in positive ways to relieve stress, communicate effectively, empathize with others, overcome challenges and defuse conflict” (Melinda, 2021). When looking at staff retention and the factors that play a part in keeping good staff, supervisor support is a crucial aspect. A leader who has emotional intelligence will be able to do this with great ease.

There are four domains within Emotional Intelligence that are used to define an individual with emotional intelligence: self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, and relationship management. Self-management can be described as one’s ability to control emotions that could be impulsive. An individual with strong self-management skills would have the ability to take initiative and be able to adapt to a changing environment. Self-awareness is one’s ability to be able to recognize one’s feelings and how they may or may not affect decision making. It’s also the ability to know one’s strengths and weaknesses.

“Emotional intelligence, or EQ, is the predictor that distinguishes outstanding performers and leaders from the average. More than any other skill, EQ helps you build transformative relationships throughout your organization, whatever your role may be. A deeper understanding of yourself heightens your awareness and your own needs, as well

as the needs of those you lead. Understanding how and why your emotions influence your behavior helps you make more intelligent decisions, enabling you to identify opportunities that become game-changers for your business” (Connors, 2020, pg. 7).

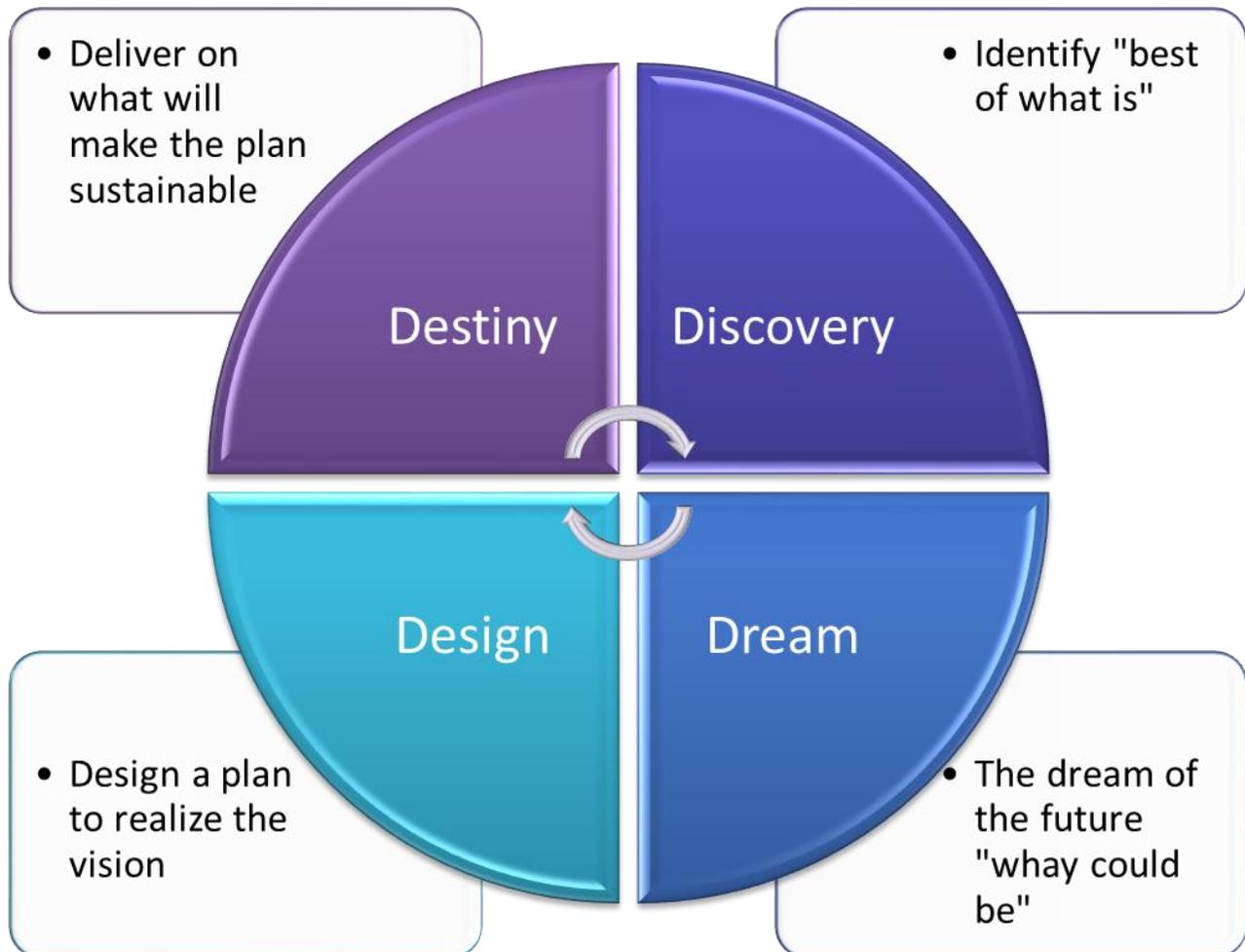
Staff’s happiness and motivation to do well, is the determining factor as to whether or not an individual leader has emotional intelligence and utilizes it in the work place.

Framework for Analysis

Appreciative Inquiry Approach

“Appreciative Inquiry is **an approach to organizational change which focuses on strengths rather than on weaknesses** - quite different to many approaches to evaluation which focus on deficits and problems” (Appreciative, 2019). I chose to utilize this approach for a couple of reasons. The primary reason was that the agency already utilizes an employee survey; where many of the questions are focused on areas that staff feels need to be improved. I wanted to take a different approach in hopes of identify the primary reasons individuals stay for as long as they do. Below is the cycle of the appreciative inquiry approach.

The Appreciative Inquiry Approach (the 4 D's)



In the Case Management department, we have attempted to mitigate the turnover issues that have plagued our department. We broke down one client's case management assignment over the span of three years, from 2014-2017. Bear in mind, this client belonged on a caseload with 30 other clients who experienced the same disruption in services. See chart below for more detail.

Client case manager assignment 2014-2017

Client	CM/Date Employed
Client #1	CM#1 (7/7/14- 7/31/14)
	CM#2 (8/1/14- 8/25/14)- interim
	CM#3 (8/25/14- 6/1/15)
	CM#4 (6/1/15- 6/12/15)- interim
	CM#5 (6/12/15- 5/2/16)
	CM#6 (5/2/16- 6/6/16)- interim
	CM#7 (6/6/16- 9/2/16)
	CM#8 (9/12/16- 3/31/17)
	CM#9 (3/31/17- 12/31/17)

Methods

For my own research, I conducted interviews with individuals at the non-profit area agency that I work for who have been at the agency for a minimum of 5 years. I did not interview individuals who report to me as direct staff. I spoke with individuals in our behavioral health sector and developmental services in a variety of different roles. My hope was to gain insight on why individuals have stayed at the agency as long as they have. I used the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach in hopes of understanding how people feel, think and behave to determine the efficacy of what the agency is doing well. By using the appreciative inquiry approach I hope

to focus on the things the agency does well, I can in turn take that information to create a program that strengthens these factors in all departments across the agency.

Results

Upon completion of my interviews, it was clear that leadership played a significant role as to why they have remained and plan to continue to remain at this agency. When asked what leadership qualities they felt were most important to them, the primary characteristic identified was that they felt their supervisor was empathetic to their needs, not only as employees but as humans in general. Individual consideration is one of the primary elements of transformational leadership. This is mediated by utilizing emotional intelligence.

There were other areas that were identified as important to staff and also played a significant role as to why they have stayed at the agency for as long as they have. One area was their own professional development- enhanced by their Supervisor's ability to recognize their strengths and what motivates them.

Discussion/Analysis

As previously discussed in the literature review, a transformation leadership style that encompasses emotional intelligence allows for this capacity of individual consideration. When staff feels that they are valued and recognized beyond their day to day tasks; their motivation level increases. Being motivated by one's work is almost a certain guarantee that staff will stay for the foreseeable future. However, it is important to note that this individual consideration needs to be sustained long-term.

I hope to be able to create a curriculum in which individuals who are stepping into leadership roles, will have access to this valuable information and provide ways in which they can enhance their skills as emotionally intelligent leaders.

In conclusion, both historical research as well as my own research, has inexplicably proven the initial theory that emotional intelligence in leaders is in fact the key to staff retention. Staff retention is obtained through job satisfaction, those who are satisfied in their work, often do not leave. Job satisfaction is a result of a leader's ability to understand their employees and provide them with the support and the tools to motivate. Emotional intelligence gives leaders the ability to carry this out.

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Appendix A

Interview #1

Interview Questions	Answers
1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?	I love what I do; I love who I work and who I work for. I enjoy working with others who are solution based. I enjoy helping others learn and grow.
2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?	They are the reasons I stay at this agency.
3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?	Clear direction, organization, and making lists help me stay motivated. Being able to have open communication with my Supervisor.
4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even tempered- process information before reacting • Solution based • Realistic expectations- we are all human and have our own idiosyncrasies and bad days • Empathetic- understands that staff has lives outside of work that are also important. • Asks how I am doing and follows up on it. • Jumps in and provides support when needed
5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?	<p>Yes, it is true. I have seen instances where it's been validated. They advocate for things they feel strongly about.</p> <p>In the moment validation "that's a great idea"</p>
6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?	I have had great experiences with supervisors. Felt supported. People can't move mountains. Open door policy can express yourself openly. There is nothing I can think of at the moment that I feel I am not currently getting.

Appendix B

Interview #2

Interview Questions	Answers
1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?	I appreciate the flexibility. The positive work environment, enjoying those that I work with and work for. I feel supported.
2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?	On a scale from 1-10, it would have to be 10. It's entirely why I have stayed as long as I have.
3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?	Expectations from Supervisor are clear and the open communication allows for a better understanding of processes.
4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Someone who can reflect on their own actions • Recognizes deficits and wants to improve upon them • Personality matters: calm, problem solver, supportive, consistent- non reactive
5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?	Yes- I have brought up particular needs and felt they were addressed
6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?	More 1 on 1 time, perhaps some supervision time

Appendix C

Interview #3

Interview Questions	Answers
1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awesome co-workers • Accommodating supervisors • Being able to see others overcome obstacles • Less than 3 miles from home- Small commute
2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?	These are the reasons I have stayed as long as I have. They are very important to me.
3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?	Teaching new skills Motivated by watching people succeed.
4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No micromanaging • Accommodating • Not hard fisted • Understanding of situations. • Everybody is willing to help others.
5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?	They ask you to do something and put their faith in you- so yes I feel my input is valued.
6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?	Nothing, they don't micromanage; expect you to do your job. Have faith you do what you are meant to do. No struggle. They are accommodating

Appendix D

Interview #4

Interview Questions	Answers
<p>1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?</p>	<p>Management and supervision- great supervisor who is accessible. Understanding and supportive- teaching me how to do my job. Understanding that I have a family life. Non-judge mental.</p> <p>Flexibility- flexible hours. Even with mandatory hours have been able to flex.</p> <p>The staff I work with are committed and dedicated to the work they do</p> <p>Agency investment- invested in me and made me feel like there is opportunity to grow and I feel valued.</p>
<p>2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?</p>	<p>They are 100% why I have stayed, but I also don't want to start over somewhere new.</p>
<p>3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?</p>	<p>Creating things- the feeling I am doing is going to improve things for other people and other client</p> <p>Collaboration</p> <p>Working with clients and getting to spend some time with them.</p> <p>Being provided with expectations and clear understanding of next steps from Supervisor</p>
<p>4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transparency • Ability to give good clear directions • Supportive- if you make mistake we can work it out • Collaborative
<p>5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?</p>	<p>Yes- I do believe she does.</p> <p>She asks for input- she makes a decision that is based off of conversation. Collaborative in what we do.</p>
<p>6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?</p>	<p>What would be helpful is making sure there are follow up emails after talking on the phone or Zoom. Provides a little bit more direction- can be forgetful. So follow up and direction is helpful.</p>

Appendix E

Interview #5

Interview Questions	Answers
1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?	The clients Supervisors have been there for us- has advocated. Enjoy the staff I work with Supervisors are willing to step in when short staffed
2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?	These are the reasons I have stayed at the agency for so many years.
3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?	Supervisor allows for me to organize events Likes variety
4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Respectful • Check-ins • Listening • Asks for input • Feeling valued
5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?	Yes, when they ask questions they utilize the input given. Higher Ups asks for input on processes before finalizing.
6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?	Nothing really, they pull their weight and assist with staffing. Available as needed. Maybe work on the approach? Broken link in communication on how to approach staff about needs at times.

Appendix F

Interview #6

Interview Questions	Answers
1.) What factors play the most significant part of why you enjoy your current job?	Timing and efforts of Supervisor to want to maintain me as an employee. The agency seems to want to keep people. Being able to grow within the agency and having superiors recognize my efforts.
2.) How much do these factors play a role in why you have stayed with the agency for as long as you have?	The above mentioned reasons are why I stay with this agency and haven't left.
3.) What motivation factors do you like best in your current role?	Has the freedom to do side projects Finding my way and what it is that I enjoy Having supervisors that have my back- look out for my best interests.
4.) What supervisor qualities are most important to you?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Trust- relationship • Open door- policy
5.) Do feel that your Supervisor values your input?	Yes, very transparent relationship- has conversations about decisions- opportunities.
6.) What things could your supervisor do differently that would contribute to you doing your best work- if anything?	My supervisors are great but sometimes I want to feel more empowered- some supervisors want to take over when things get tough. Clear guidelines and expectations while still being autonomous.