

**TURNOVER
WHOSE FAULT IS IT?
by
Roy Oberg**



As a young boy, I remember the pride my father had in both his career and in his employers, Levi Strauss and Company. He started with Levi at the age of 25 as a stock assistant in Brooklyn, New York. He retired 27 years later as a Regional Sales Manager responsible for the sales of \$250 million worth of blue jeans. Every year at the company picnic, I can recall seeing the same faces. No one seemed to leave the company for anything other than a transfer or retirement. There was certainly job-related stress, anxiety and frustration, but companies and employees seemed to view their relationship with each other differently than they do today. Companies were not viewed as simply a paycheck, and employees were not viewed as a replaceable commodity. Would you like to know why the loyalty between companies and their employees in the corrugated industry is not where either side would like it to be? So would I.

Let's look at the people side of this equation first. As a recruiter, I talk to people every day about their careers. I hear first hand what people like and what they dislike about their particular job, plant and company. Whether it is a single plant, independent or one of the large integrated corporations, the comments are quite similar. Executives at the top of the company chain of command are not dramatically different from front line supervision in this regard. People want a sense of self-control, to be treated with respect and to be appreciated for their contribution and expertise. I believe that these emotional issues play a much greater role in job tenure and satisfaction than financial compensation every will. When a candidate calls my office, it is rarely just a casual call to see what other opportunities are out there. More often than not, it is a call from an individual who is emotionally frustrated with how he is being treated by Management. It is common to hear "my manager yells at me", "I'm ignored, no one listens to my ideas.", or possibly the worst, "I rarely talk to the managers, so I'm not going anywhere in this company.". After hearing these types of frustrations for many years, I can empathize with those employees who might feel that the grass has got to be greener on the other side of the fence.

As for the companies, it is my opinion that the Plant General Manager sets the tone of the plant and the corporate office sets the tone of the corporation. It is that very tone that employees respond to. By setting a tone of mutual respect, professional development well defined accountability and realistic goals most employees will respond with greater loyalty and job satisfaction. On the other hand, if the work environment is one of threats, vague or unrealistic goals and clogged lines of communication most employees know that there is a box plant somewhere that will offer them the chance of a more fulfilling job.

The employers I talk to daily from across the country tell me substantially the same thing. "I can't find any good people.", "Where has all the talent gone?", or even "I can't improve my

plant with the people I've got." I tend to believe that the talent level has probably gone up over the last twenty years. Today's workforce is more educated and better trained than it was years ago. What has changed is that the average job tenure has become so short that before an individual can make a true impact at Company A, he is either forced or motivated to look into a new opportunity at Company B. Employment honeymoons seem to have shrunk from six months to about six days. With little room for error in the marketplace and little patience from the company itself is high turnover such a mystery?

Most football fans are well aware of what free agency has done to the NFL, and I don't just mean destroying the Dallas Cowboys. The elite talent in the league is loyal mainly to himself and markets his services to the highest bidder. This is very expensive to the teams, and with such a yearly rotation of talent it becomes very difficult for a team to maintain a sense of continuity. Perhaps one way around this type of financial one-up-manship is to provide an employment environment that prevents income from being the primary, or at least the only, consideration. If more emphasis is placed on the employee's non-financial needs, maybe that employee is less tempted to leave because of a higher income that a competitor is willing to pay. At every level of the company food chain, an element of empathy and true support can go a long way toward improving job satisfaction when times are tough.

Ultimately, a degree of turnover is healthy for the Corrugated Industry. Fresh ideas and new perspectives are key ingredients for progress and growth. But tough competition and often below market pricing seem to fuel the turnover of personnel to unhealthy levels. With many of the countries major markets oversupplied with container capacity, it seems this is a trend that may be difficult to change, but not impossible. Perhaps, if each supervisor, manager or executive would hold themselves accountable for their staff's success or lack of success, this trend might be reversed just a little at a time.

Roy Oberg is the Company Leader of Oberg and Associates, The dominant recruiting company in the Corrugated Industry. He started in recruiting in 1984. Prior to that he was the Starting fullback for the Houston Oilers from 1981 to 1984. Roy's education occurred in Tibet studying Transcendental Meditation under the Dali Lama.