## STATE/LOCAL CLIPS

a wizardly understanding of how-to use that component—often in ways the component's designer never even considered. In that latter category there are those who try to manipulate the inputs and outputs for malfeasant purposes such as attempting to take over system level control of computers that don't belong to them. This last group contains the author(s) of the various recurrences of Code Red.

Security best practices at their core do not focus on the elimination of risk. These practices instead focus on the mitigation of risk in a specific environment. Every business and every agency has different demands and different levels of risk tolerance. Of course, many organizations follow the security best practice of:

- analyzing vulnerability notifications as they are released to determine if they apply in their business environment;
- testing them against their effect on line of business applications in a test environment;
- applying those patches to all appropriate systems in production; and
- updating their system documentation to include the patch in all future builds.

However, a frighteningly high percentage of organizations do not follow this practice. A company or agency that doesn't patch its systems as described above should make sure that it is mitigating the risk of exposure in some other fashion. If not, it should not be surprised when its private data is exposed, its services are stolen, and its network (and perhaps business) are ground to an abrupt halt. It also shouldn't be surprised when hundreds of other organizations contact it to find out why it is engaged in a network attack against them. ■

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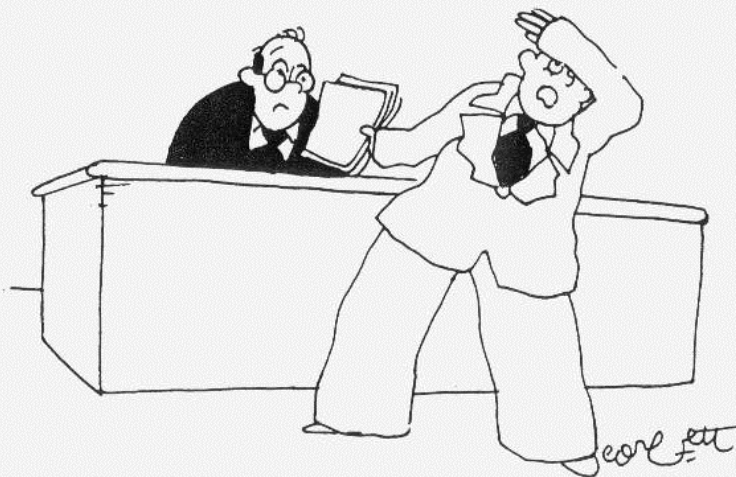
"Here's the (sob) employee morale report, sir!"

Why managers can't find or keep qualified support staff

GAIL FELDMAN

The backbones of many organizations are the office and administrative assistants who operate programs and support most management functions, yet successful recruitment and retention of qualified support staff is a common problem for many public agencies. A recent study of the courts in California serves as an excellent example of the difficulty in recruiting and retaining qualified courtroom clerks, judicial assistants, and process clerks—which has now become a major predicament for many court executive officers in California.

Identifying Obstacles

In this study of several local trial courts, the focus was on identifying obstacles in recruiting qualified staff and retaining them. The results are hardly unique—indeed, the common problem-causing factors or circumstances found in the courts are generally applicable to other public agencies:

- compensation is not high enough to attract or retain qualified staff and salary differentials between positions are insufficient to encourage promotion;
- insufficient promotional opportunities are available;
- job candidates lack interpersonal skills and ability to work in teams and perform tasks simultaneously; and
- examinations focus on job knowledge to the exclusion of the skills and abilities needed for positions.

The Compensation Factor

Compensation can be one of the most significant factors in recruitment and retention, particularly if another similar agency within the same commuting shed is compensating similar positions at a higher level. This is particularly relevant for positions that require a certain area of knowledge and skill, in the case of courtroom clerks. Often the lower compensating agency becomes the training ground and feeder route to the higher compensating agency.

Differential in compensation levels between classifications also affects recruitment of qualified internal candidates. Positions that require higher skill, perhaps less flexibility in schedule, and that are seen as requiring a

greater workload are only attractive when the compensation differential between positions is significant. The compensation differential factor is also highly sensitive. The average salary differential between courtroom and office support staff in California was 14 percent and courts paying less than 5 percent differential had difficulty attracting applicants.

Promotional Opportunities

Promotional opportunities within the classification structure directly affect retention. Support staff will remain in workplaces where the job series has well defined, stratified levels of increasing responsibility and supervisory position opportunities. This, however, often conflicts with management goals of flattening an organization, flexibility in using support positions, and eliminating unnecessary management. The attraction of higher compensation seems to drive interest in promotional opportunity more than personal needs such as self esteem. Therefore, providing increased compensation and other financial incentives periodically to

"The boss is up to something."
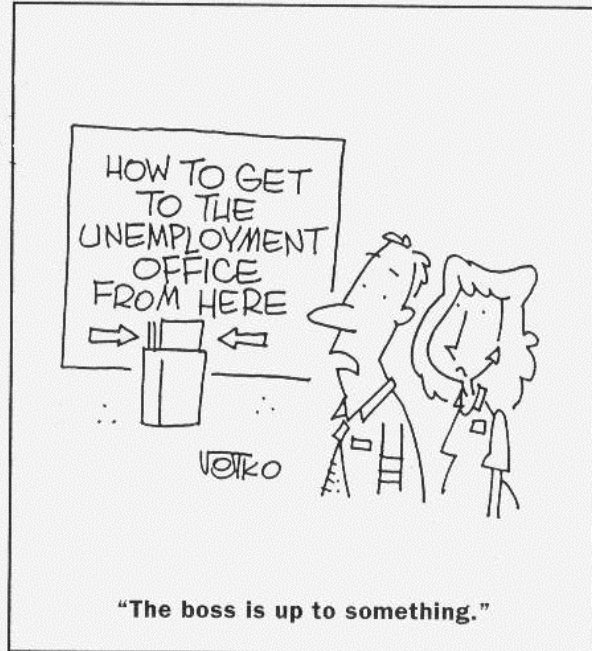
those who learn additional skills will have the same impact on retention as would providing additional promotional classifications.

Unintentional Failures

Examinations can create unintended failures to successfully pro-

mote internal candidates or recruit externally. Exams that test specific knowledge required by higher-skilled courtroom clerk positions resulted in high failure rates among many internal candidates. Courts that were more successful in promoting from within to higher-skill support functions utilized tests that assessed skills and abilities including listening, handling multiple assignments simultaneously, using appropriate judgment, and oral communication skills. These courts also provided training to staff prior to testing.

It is notable that the absence of basic skills, such as the ability to use proper grammar, resulted in higher failure rates on exams among internal candidates, suggesting that basic skill training might be needed for many employees.

Training a Key Component

Finally, training is a key component of successfully preparing internal candidates for higher-level opportunities. Training was also viewed by support staff as useful in preparation for promotion and for success in meeting changing job expectations, particularly in the court environment, which changed over the last several years. Courts that did not have significant problems promoting internal candidates provided structured training—particularly on the job—training manuals, and special courses. ∎

CHECK LIST

For Successful Recruitment and Retention of Qualified Support Staff

✓ Allow for adequate pay differentials between classifications and positions, particularly those that require higher skill levels and less schedule flexibility.

✓ Benchmark salaries with similar agencies within the same commute area.

✓ Utilize examination and testing that measures skills and abilities needed for the work environment instead of specific knowledge of the work area.

✓ Develop training positions and programs to encourage advancement of internal candidates and to assist staff in meeting job expectations.

✓ Structure a job series with stratified levels of increasing responsibility and supervisory positions with commensurate compensation to provide adequate promotional opportunities.

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