



Coaching for Retention

A New Application for Leadership Coaching





Coaching for Retention

Recall for a moment how you felt when you last started a new job. Excited? Focused? Engaged? Maybe a little nervous, but not in a bad way? There's something energizing about a fresh start, a clean slate, a chance to see your work with fresh eyes and apply your skills and experience. It feels like each day brings opportunities to learn and grow, a chance to leave your mark. There is comfort in being in a new place where you feel wanted and appreciated.

In time, things settle down and those feelings temper—maybe a little, or maybe a lot. Ups and downs are inevitable. But those feelings of being appreciated for your expertise may be fewer and farther between, and the “downs” start to accumulate, prompting thoughts of an exit. Or maybe the allure of new “ups” at a different organization sound compelling, promising to bring those old feelings back again.

This cycle affects all levels of employees, from frontline workers to the CEO. And when a highly valued senior leader leaves the organization, it

sets off a disruptive flurry of changes, prompting productivity loss and possibly more exits. In the sweep of the Great Resignation, **HR professionals are looking for new, creative ways to retain top talent in their organizations, including those in senior leadership positions.** Replacing these employees is costly and difficult, and a tight labor market makes finding and attracting quality hires especially challenging. Furthermore, today's workforce has new expectations of employers and the environments in which they work. **You need retention strategies to meet these challenges.** Consider the following questions:

- What retention strategies does your organization currently have in place for its senior leaders and other top talent? Are these strategies working?
- How would the organization benefit if retention of these leaders improved?





Understanding Why Employees Leave

The first step in addressing employee retention at all levels, including senior leaders, is to understand what causes them to leave. This means getting to the bottom of why each person actually leaves your organization, not making assumptions or guesses at the reasons. Research reveals a wide range of reasons why people quit their jobs. They often vary depending on the worker population surveyed. However, across many studies, common themes emerge. Some reasons can be described as transactional—things like compensation and benefits, flexibility in scheduling, organizational change, or a lack of opportunity for advancement. Other reasons are about relationships or about how people feel—for example, not feeling valued, not feeling like they belong, or feeling that the workplace is toxic to their well-being, that they are not supported, or that they are just burned out.

As a 2021 McKinsey report¹ contends, **there's a major disconnect between why employees leave and why employers think they leave.** Specifically, employees were “far more likely to prioritize relational factors,” whereas employers were “more likely to focus on transactional ones.” The stakes of this disconnect are high. The McKinsey research warns us, “By not understanding what their employees are running from, and what they might gravitate to, company leaders are putting their very businesses at risk.” In other words, **if you don't know the real factors that are driving people away from your organization—or what's drawing them to something or someplace else—you cannot build an effective retention strategy.**

In Search of Well-Being

Much has been written recently about employees' search for well-being—and their employers' role in helping create conditions to find well-being at work. According to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, well-being is “the state of being happy, healthy, or prosperous.” Certainly the workplace has an impact on all three of these factors, for better or worse.

To retain employees, organizations need to step up their leadership skills and human resource practices to help employees fend off burnout and provide accelerated professional and career opportunities. If they do not, their employees will find other organizations claiming to create happy, healthy, and prosperous working conditions.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- What “downs” are your leaders experiencing?
- What “ups” do other employers offer that you don't?
- What are you doing to understand why leaders leave?
- How can you act on that information?



¹Aaron De Smet, Bonnie Dowling, Marino Mugayar-Baldocchi, and Bill Schaninger. “Great Attrition or Great Attraction? The Choice Is Yours.” *McKinsey Quarterly*, September 8, 2021. <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/great-attrition-or-great-attraction-the-choice-is-yours>



Leadership Coaching As a Retention Strategy

As the McKinsey study suggests, when some human resource leaders consider retention strategies, they are inclined to implement those that are transactional: retention bonuses, for example, or promotions, new titles, special perks, or expanded benefits. But these are proving to be insufficient in today's work environment because they don't fully address **the main reason many employees are leaving their jobs: to protect their well-being.** Personal well-being is increasingly valued by employees and organizations alike. Toxic cultures, burnout, and feeling unsupported and unempowered chip away at well-being, impacting not only job satisfaction and engagement but also physical and mental health.

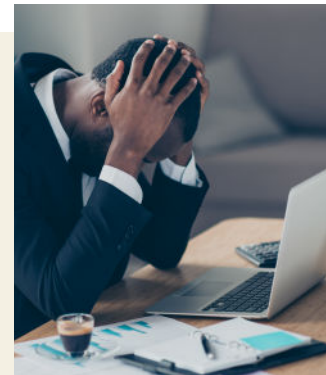
One retention strategy gaining traction in the modern workplace, especially at the senior-leader level, is **leadership coaching.** Traditionally an intervention to address performance and development issues, the coaching engagement can be realigned to focus on well-being issues that impact retention. Coaching is a way to make strides on retention issues that are more relational—the ones that are about engagement, belonging, and feeling valued—factors that hit at a deeper level than more transactional strategies. In fact, simply being selected for coaching can make a leader feel valued, worthy of the investment, and integral to an organization's long-term plans.

BURNOUT AT THE SENIOR LEVEL

“Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.” —William Shakespeare

Today's business leaders can likely relate to King Henry IV's lament that the burden of his royal responsibilities kept him from sleeping at night. Undeniably, the stakes are high for those in senior leadership—much is demanded from them, their jobs are complex and isolating, and the implications of failure can be heavy. Adding to the pressure is the way many corporate cultures have normalized the intensity and stress that accompany these roles, leaving senior leaders unable or reluctant to recognize how much is too much. Furthermore, senior leaders tend to have a high level of personal drive and responsibility and an inclination toward perfectionism. They desire to show those they lead, as well as stakeholders and customers, that they have everything under control. They may take pride in their ability to power through any challenges, even at the expense of their personal well-being. It's no wonder, then, that senior leaders are ripe for sleepless nights (just like King Henry IV) as well as other mental and physical manifestations of burnout. Coaching can help these leaders navigate unhelpful notions and harmful stereotypes, recognize and prioritize the need for balance, and cultivate a healthy, sustainable approach to the job. Begin assessing the well-being of your senior leaders by asking:

- Which of these tendencies do you see among leaders at your organization?
- In what way does your organization's culture feed these unhealthy tendencies?
- What can your organization do to help senior leaders better manage the stress and intensity of their jobs?





How Can Coaching Improve Well-Being?

Organizations utilize coaching in a range of circumstances—when a leader is preparing for or assuming a new role, when there’s a perceived performance or relationship deficiency, to develop or strengthen specific skills, or to enhance strong performance. Coaching helps leaders explore situations with a new perspective, understand themselves in new way, create new mindsets for approaching situations, and build new and more productive habits. The coach serves as a trusted, external thinking partner—which is a large reason why coaching works! The boss, HR, and others are inherently painted with having a corporate objective. The coach relationship, however, provides a safe place to explore the intersection of the employee’s needs with those of the organization.

Our 2021 [coaching study](#) identified a list of positive organizational outcomes across our various coaching programs. The findings also note improved leadership behaviors in areas including communication, conflict management, and productivity, which are common performance areas targeted by coaching. But notably, 73 percent

of participants reported their overall well-being improved from leadership coaching. Retention was not the primary focus of any of these coaching engagements—performance improvement was. The boost in well-being was a happy byproduct. If well-being is a factor in why employees choose to stay or leave, coaching can clearly be a difference-maker.

How does coaching for retention differ from traditional coaching, then? **Coaching for retention** is based on the principles of traditional leadership coaching. For example, both are ultimately driven by the coachee, not the coach, and both follow a specific process. However, there are some subtle but important differences. Whereas improved well-being is often a byproduct of traditional leadership coaching, it is a major focus when coaching for retention. Rather than considering the perspectives of others, coaching for retention encourages coachees to examine themselves and their own relationship to their job. And while traditional coaching emphasizes confidence and potential, coaching for retention emphasizes satisfaction and resilience.

Traditional Coaching	Coaching for Retention
• Focus is on performance and development; well-being is a byproduct • Examines others’ perspective of coachee (360-degree assessment tools) • Improves relationships with others • Increases confidence • Emphasizes potential	• Focus is on well-being and retention; performance is a byproduct • Examines coachee’s perspective of self • Improves relationship with job and role with a focus on career planning • Increases satisfaction • Emphasizes resilience
← Coachee-driven → ← Process-driven →	



Three Distinct Roles for Retention Coaching

Rather than assessing for an employee's performance or behavioral gaps, assessing for satisfaction levels and the ability to be resilient are key considerations in how and when to implement retention coaching. This kind of coaching can play **three distinct roles** in retention programs. When used preemptively, it can keep a leader productive, engaged, and able to avoid job factors that can negatively impact personal well-being.

When employees are demonstrating potentially unhealthy behaviors that put their personal well-being at risk, coaching can provide the experiences and tools to get them back on track. And for employees in the throes of burnout and withdrawal, coaching can play a restorative role in well-being.



In each of these circumstances, coaches use a specific process to guide the engagement and create an environment that is safe, respectful, and goal based.

Think of the leaders your organization can least afford to lose. Which lane best describes them?



Coaching Approaches for Retention and Well-Being

Coaches can utilize a range of approaches when addressing issues of retention and well-being with a leader. For example, they may work with a leader to:



Explore **alternatives** to leaving the job, including “out-of-the-box” thinking



Revisit **purpose and values** and review what the draw was to the job/career in the first place



Discuss and prioritize **routines, setting boundaries**, and specific practices to “**recharge batteries**”



Focus on **gratitude** and **celebrating success**



Use **dyad coaching** to address interpersonal issues such as feeling undervalued

COACHING TO FEND OFF BURNOUT

Burnout doesn't happen in an instant, like a lightning strike. It is more like a campfire, taking a long time to go from the first spark to smoldering ashes. In an article at the talent management website [TLNT](#), Bella Zanesco, CEO of the consulting firm Wellboard, describes the behaviors that precipitate burnout. Leaders will likely first express frustration with their situations, then anger, and then apathy before reaching the mental and physical crises that define burnout. From there, a leader may be compelled to withdraw—both from their job and even from aspects of their personal life. The path to recovery, Zanesco notes, is based in self-knowledge and acceptance, factors that a coach is particularly equipped to facilitate. In fact, coaching interventions at the point of the early behaviors can help a leader avoid the lows of burnout and withdrawal altogether. The following questions will help you start thinking about the state of burnout at your organization:

- What **unhealthy behaviors** are apparent among your leaders that may indicate burnout may become—or is—an issue?
- How is your organization supporting these leaders to keep them from burning out and withdrawing?
- What interventions are currently in place?





Planning a Retention Coaching Program for Your Organization

The benefits of adding a coaching element to your organization's retention strategy can not only increase the odds of keeping senior leaders at the organization, but it can also enhance all aspects of their well-being. How do you get started?

Understand and get real about retention challenges at your organization. Consider:

- What are your senior leaders up against?

- Why are they leaving—or considering leaving?

- What can be done to address those issues?

Have more frequent succession planning sessions and career conversations. Ask yourself:

- Do your leaders see a future at your organization?

- What are their goals? What do they want to do next?



- Do they feel valued and supported?

- How can they develop further?

Assess for signs of burnout. Consider the following:

- Are they sending up any flares?

- Has their behavior/demeanor changed?

- What is the culture at the organization?

Be realistic about a manager's time and capability to coach for retention. Think through:

- Are senior leaders at your organization getting informal coaching elsewhere? Is it effective?



- Do they feel valued and supported?

Establish program goals and governance. Start by asking yourself:

- How does coaching fit in your overall program?

- What are the program parameters, terms, and expectations?

- What are the measures of success?

Resist the urge to filter out high performers. Think about:

- How can your “best of the best” get even better?

COACHING FOR RETENTION: A CASE STUDY

In 2021, Dion Leadership partnered with a 40,000-employee hospital system experiencing significant organizational change (in addition to the workplace strains caused by the COVID-19 pandemic) and helped the organization implement coaching as part of its comprehensive retention strategy. This program falls within the preemptive retention coaching program described in this e-book, where participants were not assessed as burnt out but rather at a higher risk of leaving without accelerated development and a clear path to a system-wide role or other advancement opportunities.

Knowing they were in a highly competitive labor market in a major metropolitan area, the organization identified 10 senior leaders critical to its success and invited them to participate in the program. In addition to compensation considerations and development planning focused on upskilling, each participant would receive approximately 30 hours of coaching time during the year-long program, which also included a 360-degree assessment. The message to the participants was clear: they were highly valued, and the organization was committed to keeping them and supporting their growth, even at their high level.

Eighteen months later, all ten participants were still with the organization; one had been promoted, and two had assumed higher-level interim roles. Program administrators reported elevated performance among leaders who were already at the top of their game. Specifically, they noted increased communication skills, improved team building, and the development of a more advanced and transparent culture. Participants also reported improved performance and had begun to mentor others and develop their own coaching style. The success of this program inspired the organization to implement a second cohort in 2022.





Would you like your employees to start every day excited and end every day accomplished?

Dion Leadership can help you by providing:

- Leadership Coaching
- Leadership Development Programs
- Team Effectiveness Facilitation
- Talent Assessment
- Organizational Capabilities Consulting

We do this work with a:

- Long-term partnership philosophy
- People-centered approach
- Team of extraordinary coaches & consultants
- Set of powerful solutions

Let's get started!

Contact us today so that we can pinpoint how best we can help your organization.

STEP 1

DISCOVERY

Tell us about your unique problem.

STEP 2

TAILORED SOLUTION

We provide a custom plan.

STEP 3

RESULTS

Together, we get to work!

DION
LEADERSHIP

39555 Orchard Hill Place
Suite 115, Novi, MI 48375
248.515.2235

DionLeadership.com
LetsTalk@DionLeadership.com