Becoming a Key Employee

Adapted from a topic presented at an AF employee seminar

Ben Franklin said, "When you're finished changing, you're finished." Becoming a key employee doesn't happen without change, growth, and effort. Whether owner, manager, or employee, we all have room to improve.

What does a key employee look like? A key employee is a valuable and integral person on the team, regardless of their position. People notice when a key employee is absent. The day feels longer or the job doesn't go as well when those coworkers aren't there.

As a starting point, every person should strive to be on time, have a good attitude, be coachable, and put forth effort. This baseline, however, is not the foundation of becoming a key employee. The principles are deeper and more difficult than that.

As the title of this article suggests, *becoming* a key employee is an ongoing process. We cannot sit back and expect improvement to happen automatically. It takes resolve and practice to become a key employee, just as it does to grow in our Christian walk.[1]

> "The heights by great men reached and kept
> Were not attained by sudden flight,
> But they, while their companions slept,
> Were toiling upward in the night."[2]
>
> *Henry Wadsworth Longfellow*

[1] Hebrews 5:13–14 "For every one that useth milk is unskilful in the word of righteousness: for he is a babe. But strong meat belongeth to them that are of full age, even those who by reason of use have their senses exercised to discern both good and evil."

[2] "The Ladder of St. Augustine"

Growing in Value

A misconception in secular business is that you must climb the career ladder to become a valuable person. Every rung is considered better than the rung below it, and reaching the top of the ladder is the ultimate goal.

It's not wrong to climb in responsibility. If God has given us abilities that allow us to grow in responsibility and position, our leaders will recognize those gifts. Scripture warns us not to bury our talents, so we should not shy away from moving up in the company as a result of using our gifts.[3] However, climbing the career ladder simply to get to the top isn't Biblical or healthy for ourselves or the company culture. Jesus said that unbelievers look for positions of authority for the sake of having power, but Christians fill positions to serve, not to be served.[4]

[3] Matthew 25:14–30

[4] Mark 10:42–44 "But Jesus called them to him, and saith unto them, Ye know that they which are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you: but whosoever will be great among you, shall be your minister: And whosoever of you will be the chiefest, shall be servant of all."

Instead of a career ladder, consider the concept of a career lattice. Picture a healthy vine growing outward, upward, and all around, spreading out across a lattice. This model represents the value you have as you grow and develop in many areas. Remember, an employee's value isn't based on his office size, how many direct reports he has, or the award certificates on his walls. An employee brings value just in who he is becoming as a person and the characteristics he brings to the workplace.

As a young employee at a hardware store, I would often sweep and organize the department in which I worked. A coworker would ask me, "Why do you bother doing this every week? Nobody asks you to do this!"

My heartfelt answer was, "Why would my boss believe I can handle more responsibility if I can't do a simple thing like this well?"

It is true that employees may become more important in the company as they take on more responsibility. It wouldn't be fair to say that the positions of a forklift operator and the CEO bring the same value to the organization. However, we should not confuse the value of the position with the value of the person in the position. Without that distinction, we are likely to become respecters of persons, which the Bible forbids.[5]

Everyone has unique gifts that contribute to the workplace. The same is true in the body of Christ. Having different callings in the church does not mean that one member is more important than another. In both church and workplace, we recognize the importance of individual gifts working together to benefit the whole.[6]

Three Types of Valuable Employees

The following three categories remind us that people are different and have different aspirations.

The Executive. Some people aspire to leadership and do well at leading teams. They can handle the responsibility and pressure of being a leader.

The Technician. Others might say, "I just don't do well at leading. I'd rather work with my hands. Give me a tool, give me a schematic or a CAD drawing. That's where I do well." And that's okay.

The Laborer. Some people influence others as they go about their daily responsibilities but have no desire for an official position of leadership. They say, "Just give me a hammer, and the only bad result there could be is a sore thumb." People like this come to work every day and do their best to make their job and team successful.

Not everyone is going to be an executive or a technician. Not everyone is going to be a laborer. And laborers are not just laborers. They are the ones who make things run smoothly in the inner workings of a department.

Reject the idea of your value being based on how high you climb in an organization. The value you bring to your team and to your employer is how you apply your gifts and how you grow and develop for the sake of the team.

Ask yourself, *How can I provide the most benefit for my boss or my coworkers? In what ways can I improve? How can I reflect Christ in the workplace?*

Work is more than "just work." Work is representing Christ in our actions. It is fulfilling God's call for us to work, to subdue the earth, to be profitable, and to be an example of Christian ethics. We have value simply in fulfilling these commands and doing all things for God's glory.[7]

Four Steps to Becoming a Key Employee

The following four suggestions are practical, Biblical principles you can apply to become a key employee no matter what position you have.

Find Joy in Whom You Serve. Key employees find joy first in whom they serve rather than in what they do. Unselfishly focusing on who we can bless reflects Christ. C.S. Lewis says it powerfully, "Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it is thinking of yourself less." Regardless of the job, truly serving Christ through our work brings us a sense of contentment and gratefulness.

Maybe you're not finding joy in who you are serving. You might say, "But you have no idea who my boss is. I'm just working for my paycheck." True, your boss may be difficult, but you are missing an incredible blessing if you can't look back on a day's work and say, "You know, I enjoyed that. I found fulfillment in serving others for Christ's sake."

[5] James 2:9 "But if ye have respect to persons, ye commit sin, and are convinced of the law as transgressors."

[6] 1 Corinthians 12:7 "But the manifestation of the Spirit is given to every man to profit withal."

[7] Colossians 3:23 "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men."

Rather than becoming discontent or bitter towards your demanding boss or coworker,[8] look for the lessons God may be trying to teach you. Resist the temptation to criticize and blame others. A wise coworker of mine once said, "Wherever you go, you go with you." Sometimes we contribute to a problem without even realizing it, so we need to extend grace to others who may be unaware of how they are affecting us.

Invest Time and Energy. We are probably all guilty of saying or doing the right thing to make a good impression when the boss is listening or the supervisor comes around the corner. A key employee invests his time and energy without expecting personal return such as a raise or promotion. This isn't implying you work without pay. That's not ethical, Biblical, or legal.[9] But do you have ulterior motives for things you do at work?

What are some practical ways you can invest your time and energy without expecting personal return? Maybe it's keeping your work area clean and tidy beyond what you are required to do. Maybe it's lending a helping hand, offering encouragement, or showing someone you care. A few years ago, a customer was a few cents short of his bill at Paul B. Hardware. There was an awkward moment as the man, with a line of people behind him, realized he didn't have enough change. The employee at the cash register pulled a handful of change out of his pocket and paid the rest of the bill.

A popular quote says, "Character is how you treat those who can do nothing for you." This cashier probably never saw the customer again and didn't expect his kindness to be returned. Investing our time and energy to serve those who are not able to give back is sometimes harder than giving money. Jesus Himself, the best example of servanthood, said, "Inasmuch as ye have done it unto the least of these my brethren, ye have done it unto me" (Matthew 25:40).

Notice and Support Others. A key employee notices the interests and tendencies of others. Learn what is important to your supervisor or coworkers in the office or on the job. Maybe it means learning how they like their coffee and having it ready for them in the morning. Maybe it means noticing the way a supervisor or coworker does a particular task. If a coworker goes for the nail gun, you grab the hose. If a coworker needs to use one of the trucks tomorrow, wash it for them.

Go deeper than honoring others' preferences and find ways that your contribution can help the team be more effective. An example of this kind of teamwork is found in the New Testament where Paul's coworkers supplemented what he was lacking, refreshing him and blessing his ministry.[10]

A key employee finds ways to quietly compensate for a coworker's weakness, such as volunteering for a particular task because a coworker doesn't enjoy it or isn't good at it. Try asking your coworkers what you can do to make their jobs easier. Compliment rather than criticize your boss and coworkers. Negative comments without a spirit of support destroy a workplace. Instead, imagine the results of an upbuilding, supportive environment where coworkers compliment and serve each other.

Determine to Do What's Necessary and Right. A key employee is determined to do what is necessary and right in every circumstance. It is a challenge to be in a position where a customer or vendor asks you to do something wrong or unethical. But our society needs to see men and women who stand up and do what's right without compromise!

In the city where I live and minister, it is devastating to see so many families falling apart because men are not willing to do what is necessary and right. Their children often grow up to repeat the cycle. You may not know what impact you have on an unbelieving coworker. Your example of taking responsibility to do what is right and do what is needed in the company shines as a testimony.[11] Your example can have eternal consequences, perhaps inspiring a fellow employee to seek something better for his own life.

Traits of a Key Employee

When leaders hire new employees, they usually look for

[8] 1 Peter 2:18–19 "Servants, be subject to your masters with all fear; not only to the good and gentle, but also to the froward. For this is thankworthy, if a man for conscience toward God endure grief, suffering wrongfully."

[9] 1 Corinthians 9:9–10 "For it is written in the law of Moses, thou shalt not muzzle the mouth of the ox that treadeth out the corn. Doth God take care for oxen? Or saith he it altogether for our sakes? For our sakes, no doubt, this is written: that he that ploweth should plow in hope; and that he that thresheth in hope should be partaker of his hope."

[10] 1 Corinthians 16:17–18 "I am glad of the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus: for that which was lacking on your part they have supplied. For they have refreshed my spirit and yours: therefore acknowledge ye them that are such."

[11] Matthew 5:16 "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven."

certain traits in addition to the skills required for the job. They want employees who will be respectful and put others first. They want employees who are positive, trustworthy, and willing to trust others. Here are four more traits of a key employee.

Pursues excellence. Excellence and perfection are not the same. Excellence is the quality of being outstanding or extremely good. The pursuit of excellence is a journey, not a destination. Once a level of excellence is reached then it becomes the new average, and we work toward the next level of excellence. Although excellence is a moving target, we keep pressing toward that goal.

Takes initiative. Taking initiative requires more than just doing your job. Do you have the drive to find ways to invest and go the extra mile to help the team achieve? Do you assess situations and act proactively without someone pointing things out or instructing you to do them? Two cautions are in order here. First, when taking initiative, be careful not to overstep your boundaries. Second, humbly accept when your ideas are rejected.[12]

Makes a difference. This is more than just bringing muscles to work. Make a difference by bringing your God-given personality, abilities, humor, encouragement, brain, and creative ideas to the workplace. Using these gifts to bless coworkers, customers, and others can make a world of difference.

Is an ongoing learner. My four-year-old is getting into the habit of saying, "I can't do that," when I ask him to do something. It's clear to me that he can't do it because he didn't try. When he tries, he usually discovers, "I can do this!"

Being an ongoing learner means you are interested in improving in any way. Find appropriate ways to learn everything you can about your job and what your supervisor expects. Ask yourself, "What I have I learned in the last six months? How have I been challenged to grow? How has that growth been happening?" When you find yourself unsure or uncapable of doing a job, be willing to learn.

"I've Tried This, Now What?"

What if you've done your best to apply these principles, but they don't seem to be working? You might wonder why you aren't getting more opportunities to prove yourself and your abilities. Ponder the following three areas.

Be willing to ask others for feedback. Sometimes what you see as your gift is not really your strength. Perhaps you are aspiring to something outside your natural talent. Ask someone you trust for feedback on your performance. Don't look for someone who will tell you something just to make you feel good.[13] It's better to face reality and identify what your talents truly are.

Talk to your supervisor. Tell your supervisor about your interest in learning to do something better or in taking an open position. Reveal your passion to grow and learn. Perhaps you could request the opportunity to go to an Anabaptist Financial seminar or take training to develop certain skills.

Recognize that not everyone is going to be in leadership, but everyone will have influence. Rather than aspiring to a leadership position, aspire to become a person of influence. You can fill that role right now regardless of your position. In fact, I have seen people with no leadership title who had more influence than the leader. Their word carried weight, and others naturally gravitated toward them.

Others can help identify your gifts and what position you are qualified for. A coworker told me, "At some point in our lives, we are all subject to someone else's discernment." We once had an employee who applied for multiple positions in the company. He couldn't understand why he didn't get those roles. We tried to help him understand that he was doing well where he was at, and the other positions were not a good fit for him. If we had given him those jobs simply because he wanted them, he may have failed. At that point in his career, he was subject to our discernment.[14]

Three Obstacles to Becoming a Key Employee

Poor Attitude. Your attitude is a critical factor in becoming a key employee. No one wants to follow a person who exudes negativity. If you are a person with a poor attitude, you are unlikely to become a key employee.

[12] Romans 12:3 "For I say, through the grace given unto me, to every man that is among you, not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think soberly, according as God hath dealt to every man the measure of faith."

[13] Proverbs 27:6 "Faithful are the wounds of a friend; but the kisses of an enemy are deceitful."

[14] Proverbs 11:14 "Where no counsel is, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety."

Discontentment. Have you ever worked with someone who could always find something to complain about? Discontentment is closely related to being unthankful. Both attitudes create a negative work environment.[15] Others are usually relieved when a discontented employee decides to move on.

Entitlement. A person with the attitude of entitlement believes he deserves something without working for it. Entitlement can be seen in attitudes like, "My dad's the boss," or "I was hired first, so I have seniority and I'm next in line." An entitlement mentality can devastate a whole department or team.

Conclusion

Developing into a key employee takes perseverance and may feel outside your comfort zone. Don't be afraid to ask for help. Write down two or three areas you want to grow in and then be accountable to someone in those areas.[16]

John D. Rockefeller said, "I believe that every right implies a responsibility; every opportunity, an obligation; every possession, a duty."[17] We have a duty to use our God-given abilities and opportunities to bless others and bring glory to God.[18] In Jesus' parable of the ten talents, only the servants who used what had been given to them received a reward.[19] No matter what position you fill, use your talents to their fullest.

[15] Colossians 3:15 "And let the peace of God rule in your hearts…and be ye thankful."

[16] Philippians 2:15 "That ye may be blameless and harmless, the sons of God, without rebuke, in the midst of a crooked and perverse nation, among whom ye shine as lights in the world."

[17] John D. Rockefeller, Jr. (2018, June 9). *Wikiquote,*. Retrieved 22:11, March 14, 2019. From https://en.wikiquote.org/w/index.php?title=John_D._Rockefeller,_Jr.&oldid=2415312.

[18] Colossians 3:23 "And whatsoever ye do, do it heartily, as to the Lord, and not unto men."

[19] Matthew 25:23 "His lord said unto him, Well done, good and faithful servant; thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things: enter thou into the joy of thy lord."

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