

Speaker outlines ways to retain difficult employees

Elaine Williams/Lewiston Tribune

Cascade Engineering of Grand Rapids, Mich., is in the business of giving people second chances.

The business hires welfare recipients, felons and people who have suffered through addiction, said Dave Barrett, director of talent management at the company that makes plastic containers and components for trucks.

Barrett spoke Wednesday at Happy Day's Clarkston Event Center to a group of business leaders, economic development experts, social workers and clergy as part of Community Action Partnership's "Bridges to Work" program.

Retaining people who live below the poverty line has involved a variety of strategies.

"It's going to take a lot of work and it's going to take a lot of time," Barrett said. "You need to be willing to stick through it."

An employee from the state's welfare office screens applicants. Since she's their case worker, not a potential employer, she can cover territory off-limits in job interviews, such as if candidates are pregnant or own cars, Barrett said.

Many get hired in spite of their challenges, but with plans to overcome whatever adversity they face.

Sometimes it's as simple as buying someone an alarm clock. Or it could mean giving a pregnant woman an assignment in a division that makes smaller items that are easier to lift. Instruction on how bus schedules work might be provided to someone without a vehicle.

Cascade Engineering has also instituted new policies, Barrett said. A child's illness, for instance, is now considered an excused absence if there's a doctor's note, helping all parents with small kids.

Underlying those innovations was an attitude shift that involved educating Cascade Engineering's middle class employees about how huge the barriers are for impoverished individuals as they join the workforce, Barrett said.

Take the sick toddler who can't go to day care. Middle class families usually have relatives and neighbors to fill in as baby sitters, options likely not available to single parents living in poorer conditions, Barrett said.

In trainings, Cascade Engineering employees were asked if they would really leave a 2-year-old at home alone all day, or would they fail to show up for work knowing they would lose their job? Put that way, Barrett said employees agreed they would sacrifice their paycheck and started to understand the predicament a lack of resources creates.

The evolution in Cascade Engineering's workplace happened over more than a decade and took two failures. The first was in 1991, when the company hired 10 people in poverty.

"Within two weeks, all 10 were gone," Barrett said. "Some quit. Some were fired."

The attitude was "you're in our world now. I'm going to help you pulling (yourself) up by your boot straps," Barrett said.

Three years later, they tried to partner with Burger King. Employees who lasted six months in minimum-wage positions at Burger King would get the chance to apply for better paying work at Cascade Engineering.

"We never had one person make it through that program," he said.

It was only when Cascade Engineering became more aware of the cultural issues that its welfare-to-work programs began to gain traction, Barrett said.

The changes have benefited the entire company, not just the individuals who leave poverty behind, Barrett said. Cascade's successes have been widely covered in the media. Sales representatives are asked about the practices, giving them five or 10 more minutes with potential customers, time the sales staff has said is so valuable they would pay for it if they could.

And the welfare-to-work efforts have almost blended with initiatives to improve overall employee retention, Barrett said.

The business found that 40 percent of employees left in the 45 days before they went through orientation. The orientation was moved to the first or second week of employment, something that helps new employees regardless of their backgrounds.

"Is there a bottom line benefit to us?" Barrett asked. "Absolutely."