

The Labor Pool

I pledge allegiance...

Having trouble getting buy-in from employees? Here's how to get commitment of the deepest kind. By Eric Chester

In this day of the mercenary resumé builder, tumultuous employee turnover, corporate upheaval and the epidemic "free agent mentality" among employees, how would you go about getting your front line to buy in to your company's mission and purpose? I mean *really* buy in—to the degree that they would forgo better pay and improved working conditions elsewhere, and even put their life on the line for your organization?

Sounds implausible at best, if not impossible, right?

[Gen Whys] may never bleed your company colors or be able to recite your mission statement, but they'll go to the wall for the co-worker who's helping them man the drive-thru.

Why then, do young men and women continue to enlist in the U.S. Army in record numbers, even in the midst of a bloody conflict in Iraq and well-publicized protests on college campuses? Is it the signing bonus or the college tuition reimbursement program? Is it the coolness of the hip camouflage uniform? Or is it because in our current economy, a good job is just so darned hard to find?

None of the above, according to Dennis D. Cavin, Commanding General of the U.S. Army's recruiting and basic training programs. Cavin, a three star general, sat down with me over dinner at Fort Leonard Wood, MO, and shed light on this intriguing mystery.

"We asked 11,000 17- to 21-year-olds why they were enlisting in the Army. We thought it might be the signing bonus or the tuition reimbursement," Cavin said. "But those items were down on the list. Turns out, the youth of our great nation want desperately to belong to something bigger than themselves."

So much so, apparently, that they're willing to go to battle for it.

General Cavin said he regularly visits with young soldiers during their brutal days of boot camp. "I tell them I'm the guy that signed their enlistment contract, and ask them if they want to back out of the deal." But Cavin says he's never had a taker. "They know exactly what they're getting themselves into. We don't paint 'em a pretty picture just to get them to join. We're brutally honest, and these kids gravitate toward that."

Honor is one of the Army's seven basic values. Integrity is another. The Army trains young people to do what is right, legally and morally. Compare these to the contradictory messages routinely perpetuated in sports, advertising, popular music and reality television, and you might begin to see why the Army is such an attractive alternative for Generation Why. Obviously, they've grown tired of being hoodwinked, manipulated and betrayed. They demand more out of life.

"I asked a young soldier I passed in the Louisville Airport why he joined the Army," General Cavin said. "He told me he'd rather die for something he believed in than live for something that he didn't."

Cavin went on to explain that these young kids aren't going to war for their country, at least not in the traditional sense that ordinary civilians may believe. Rather, they're risking their lives for the soldier that is next to them in the foxhole.

"They feel a vital connection to the person who has their back," Cavin said.

Speaks volumes, doesn't it?

Beyond filling with pride at the level of commitment we have from the young men and women protecting our freedom, the lessons are plentiful and profound. However, let's focus on the three huge takeaways from a brilliant military leader who has this generation figured out:

- **Loyalty is an even exchange, not a one-sided transaction.** Don't expect buy in from your young talent if your organization is shallow in purpose and strictly focused on profits. Gen Why wants to know that they're a part of something that is making a worthwhile contribution to society.

- **Strive for 100% honesty in every phase of your operation.** Resist the temptation to make an entry-level job—or any job—sound better than it is just to fill a vacancy in a hurry. You may temporarily solve your scheduling dilemma, but you'll stock your front lines with non-committed troops who will abandon you at the first sign of trouble.

- **Encourage camaraderie among Gen Whys and provide frequent opportunities for them to build relationships away from the workplace.** They may never bleed your company colors or be able to recite your mission statement, but they'll go to the wall for the co-worker who's helping them man the drive-thru.

Having personally addressed more than 2 million teenagers, Eric Chester is the premier expert on Generation Why—in fact, he coined the term. The author of



Employing Generation Why: Understanding, Managing and Motivating Your New Work Force, Eric will be a keynote speaker at NCSAG's Fall Conference, September 10-12 in Denver.