



ASK A 20-SOMETHING

How to Motivate a Rising Star Employee When Raises Are Not an Option

You really should find money in the budget--but if you can't, here's what to do instead.

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Note: Inc.'s Ask a 20-Something series offers sage advice for navigating all manner of workplace issues, from the perspective of a young employee.

Q: One of my younger staffers is really becoming a [star employee](#). She's asked for a raise, and my gut says that I need to give it to her or I'll lose her. The problem: There's no money in the budget. How can I keep her motivated without increasing her salary?

A: Let me stop you right there: Your non-monetary rewards are insulting. Like, "[Eagleton building a Pawnee border wall](#)" level of insulting. (If you haven't seen *Parks and Recreation*, go watch it as soon as you finish reading this column.)

You see a title bump without a raise as a tangible reward that doesn't cost money. She sees a big, flashing neon message: Your company can't afford to keep her. She's going to start looking for higher-level jobs elsewhere. Immediately.

I mean, geez. Is human communication a lost art these days? You can't possibly know what she's thinking unless you ask her, so sit down with her and have an honest conversation. Tell her that she deserves a raise, you simply can't afford it, and she'll be near the top of the list when that money becomes available.

Really explain that second part. I've been in this kind of situation before, and the same thought always lurks in the back of my mind: Is there really no money in the budget? Or are you just trying to placate me? A timeline can help, so if you can, specify when that raise could come.

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If she's driven purely by money, you're out of luck. Most people aren't, though: A 2018 study from Los Angeles-based management consulting firm Korn Ferry listed [boredom as the top reason people look for new jobs](#).

Ask her about her other career goals. She may want to take on responsibilities that to you seem unrealistic for someone of her age and experience. I beg of you: Please, please, just get over it. Imagine someone with the exact same level of expertise and track record of success, but 5-10 years older. Would you give *her* that work?

Multiple times, I've lost out on roles to older candidates, despite having a stronger background. I've been told that other people's "life experience" matters more than my industry experience. Still makes me grind my teeth. Denying your young employee high-level work because of her age is a great way to get her eternally pissed off at you. And then she'll definitely want to leave.

Just in case you still aren't buying it, here's a partial solution: Find a way for her to test-drive those responsibilities. She could work with an experienced, trusted colleague on more advanced projects, rather than tackling them solo. You could even mentor her yourself, which would show her that you really do value her talent and contributions.

Most people--young, old, or anywhere in between--are motivated by the challenges they get to embrace every day. If you can't afford her raise, you can at least keep her engaged with new and interesting ones.

If you can't do that, start waving goodbye.

To submit a question for Ask a 20-Something, email calbertdeitch@inc.com. Your query could be featured in a future installment.

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