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Difficult economic times call for creative and strategic responses from companies, not least when it comes to identifying and retaining key staff, or “super keepers”.

Kas Koekemoer, a consultant industrial psychologist to business and government, told the 28th Assessment Study Group annual conference in Stellenbosch on Thursday that it was vital that South African companies identify the key performers they want to retain to keep their businesses on track.

With the skills shortage in South Africa, Koekemoer said it was vital for companies to be able to identify the staff they wanted to hire and to retain those who added key value to their operations. This can be done through using the assessment centre method.

He pointed out that “super keepers” formed mostly only 5% of a company’s staff and it was vital to ensure that they didn’t leave the company.

But what if the company’s corporate governance style is the problem? Referring to a company he consulted for at the end of last year Koekemoer said that after the assessments had been completed on staff they realised why the company had such a high attrition rate, and also why it was that many of the people who they had marked as future leaders within the company were not good fits for what was needed to grow and develop the company’s bottom line.

“Basically the corporate culture was that anyone who came up with an idea that was not in line with standard operating practices at the company was shouted down by top management, this led to many innovative and valuable staff members either withdrawing their contributions or moving on to greener pastures,” said Koekemoer.

It’s part of the process of hiring staff to really understand what they are capable of and to use assessment methods to identify if they are the most suitable candidates for the job, “you could look at a potential staff member and think that because they have an MBA they will be excellent managers and then discover that they have no ability for strategic management or leadership,” he said.

Once Koekemoer had identified that one of the biggest challenges facing the company was the attitude of the MD when he shouted down staff with innovative suggestions, he had to break the news to the boss.

Not a comfortable position to be in, but Koekemoer has a strategy for dealing with this situation. Instead of following traditional steps of giving feedback he believes that it is more useful to deal with the defences that will be raised by participants and then hold fast to your point. “When someone gets defensive hear them out but then point out what they are doing and why the criticism is still valid.” In the case of the company he was presenting as a case study he had to break the news to the MD that of four candidates he was considering for executive positions within the company none were suitable. The MD was understandably “fairly upset”, but he was persuaded by Koekemoer standing firm that he should not hire them.

In using the assessment centre methodology Koekemoer points out that the consultant must keep in mind and understand the corporate culture of the company he is working with as the two inform each other. The best assessment centre analysis and development will make no difference if there is a toxic corporate culture at a company.

“Senior management have to understand the dangers inherent in cloning your own brain drain, in other words behaving in such a way (refusing to hear staff out or being unprepared to look at new ways of doing things) will lead to the loss of key staff and limit the ability of a company to attract the talent they need for success.

This is particularly important in a time when a global recession seems to be looming. The staff that might have performed well using traditional methods, might very well come unstuck when trading conditions are tough and this is one of the main reasons why knowing the capacity of your employees and being prepared to develop them is so important.

In South Africa there is the added imperative of attracting good black managers to your company when they are in a position to pick and choose.

Essentially Koekemoer’s message is look after your staff and develop them if you don’t want to “identify them, grow them and then say goodbye to them”.