



Should you have to choose between a loyal & faithful employee and a competent employee, who would you pick?

Ian McCarthy

Here are a couple of relevant quotes, the second on army officers, but easily applied to employees:

“In looking for someone to hire, you look for three qualities: integrity, intelligence, and energy. But the most important is integrity because if they don’t have that, the other two qualities, intelligence and energy, are going to kill you.”

- Warren E Buffett, CEO & Chairman of Berkshire Hathaway

There are only four types of officer. First, there are the lazy, stupid ones. Leave them alone, they do no harm...Second, there are the hard-working, intelligent ones. They make excellent staff officers, ensuring that every detail is properly considered. Third, there are the hard-working, stupid ones. These people are a menace and must be fired at once. They create irrelevant work for everybody. Finally, there are the intelligent, lazy ones. They are suited for the highest office.

- General Erich Von Manstein (1887-1973) on the German Officer Corps

Ray McTier

In these circumstances the choice to me is clear. I would pick the employee who is loyal and faithful.

While the superstar has an upside, it is limited, and there are many potential downsides, including costs, arrogance, manageability questions, longevity questions etc. Generally it is better to deal with a known rather than an unknown.

The loyal & faithful employee, with mentoring, coaching and training is more than likely able to overcome any obstacles and become at least competent.

When times change, there may be an opportunity to hire a superstar again. The ability to do a job better than another should never be the defining factor. A team is made up of different players, personality types etc. A team of all superstars is destined for failure.

So once again, my choice is clear, the first employee described is the one I would keep.



David Marshall

Loyalty is a useless quality if the employee is incompetent. If a competent employee is not loyal, I should only keep this person until I can find someone who is both loyal and competent, supervising carefully to ensure that the competence is not aimed at some disloyal trick before the predictable dismissal.

Brian Clark

I think you're in trouble if you have to pick between a loyal but incompetent employee and a disloyal and competent employee. The right question might be, is it easier to make a loyal employee more capable or to make capable employee more loyal? If the latter isn't easier, you've got a serious challenge in the future at retaining good employees that a competitor will use to secure a stronger talent base.

Greg Michalik

Competent. Need to have top people to be successful. Loyalty is a result of the environmental conditions provided to the employee.

Niall Sullivan

It still depends on how you define limited competence. I can only say that if the competence of the "loyal and faithful" employee was really limited, it is unlikely that he/she would have remained with me long enough to be classed as either loyal or faithful. Hopefully I would have had the nous to have dispensed with their services within the first 3-6 months.

I would expect that the employees that I had retained long enough to become loyal were highly competent, so I would hold on to them against a relative newcomer, highly competent or not.

I subscribe to the old doctrine that, when filling a post, a current employee 50% capable but likely to develop in the new role quickly is equivalent to a newcomer who appears to be 200% qualified, but who will take time to adapt.

Experience over 40 years in business has borne me out on that basis 9 times out of 10.



Jim Wahl

I would choose the high potential with the understanding that as a high potential he would need to be kept challenged. If you want loyalty, get a dog.

Max Harris

The incentives are properly aligned for B. He maximizes your company while maximizing his value. And, if he leaves, you can find someone almost as good for less money later. But, in the short term, he's better set up to do the work, is heavy into his career and does not want to crater the company because it will crater himself. Loyal and faithful low achievers are still low achievers.

Anita Subramaniam

Is the "faithful" loyal employee "faithful and loyal" because he does not have the ability to find another job? If I cannot elevate the quality of work of my loyal employee, I would go for the competent person. Yes, there is a fear of losing that person, but there is also the confidence that the work will get done and done well.

Jerome Jewell

Without hesitation, I'd choose the competent employee. The killer phrase in your description is "...limited competence & potential..." What good are loyalty and faith if the person lacks potential? How useful will loyalty and faithfulness be when we fail together? Is my goal as a leader to boost performance or boost my ego?

We do not come to work to build allegiance to ourselves. This is only a by-product of allegiance, loyalty and commitment to a mission. It's a matter of priorities, and if we put the wrong thing first, then all we become are ego-driven empire builders. We have too many of them all ready.

What we do at work is much larger than just us, and leaders must keep this in mind.

So perhaps the high-potential employee has never experienced an organization that knows how to manage potential...and if we shock this employee by feeding that potential instead of ignoring it, maybe we will demonstrate that we are more than "just another organization".

I remember being told some decades ago by my mentor....



"When a leader requests loyalty from you, respond by offering integrity. When a leader requests integrity from you, respond with loyalty". First things first.

It's not just rhetoric, to some of us.

Dale Henry, MHCS

You should remove "A" from the role if you have "B" or not. "A" will at best be a drag on the productivity of others and yourself.

You should let them go from the company if you don't have a role for which they are competent. It is a weak talent management approach to have a loyal but ineffective team. If you have a team made up of 'limited competence' employees your team won't survive for long and you are only showing your limited competence (or courage) as a manager.

Clarification added:

The question assumes that you are looking for two equally valuable attributes of an employee that have no dependency. That is not a correct assumption. You should be looking for competent employees, first. Once you have competent employees you will hope you can get them to be 'loyal'. But if you have incompetent employees, you should actually hope that they are disloyal as well. They might just leave on their own (but you should wait for that).

Michele Cipolli

The role and nature you are going to play is crucial in your decision. Corporate culture and need for leadership also enable success of the new hire and long time loyalty. In a strategic position in a new SBU I would make an offer to the competent with former experience in the same job/sector, expanding his team with loyal employees willing to grow.





Steve Clarke

B. A competent employee is always the best choice. His loyalty is your responsibility.

If you are a good leader and keep them interested in their work, give them stretch targets and opportunities for growth along with a compensation package that reflect their performance then they will be loyal.

Choosing A is a sign of weak management.

Roger Henry, CMRP

If one has exercised the stewardship expected of an effective leader, the pruning would be ongoing as part of the business process. There should only be competent and high-performing employees in any organization

Dorina Grossu

Define the organization type! Some organization want to have people who are knowledgeable and help them in short term to increase internal capacity while other companies are interested to keep people on payroll. In the same time, your description as 'limited competence & potential' restricts individual's "power of change".

Pinaki Das

An employee by definition is a servant - irrespective of the grandiose titles like Director or lowly designations like Telephone operator. A servant is a servant and the owner would expect loyalty. The limited competence of the servant can be upgraded through training. In contrast if the competent employee has the right attitude including loyalty to the organization & to his word till he or she is employed there, it is fine to prefer him. However, bad attitude competence is of little value.

I would go for a loyal faithful employee & train him adequately to build his competency.



Mark Grotefend, CCC

If I was facing reductions in the organization and had to choose between the two, I would choose the competent employee. It would then be my job to ensure that employee would desire to stay with the company.

Retaining a loyal & faithful employee who has limited potential to fulfill their role only makes others in the organization have to cover for them, and my experience has been that you end up releasing them anyway because they cannot perform to the level required. However, if the loyal & faithful employee had the potential to fulfill the job requirements and the desire to do so, I would seriously consider keeping them.

Rajeswaran Muthu Venkatachalam

If I were the boss in an organization where loyalty is considered a core value, I would select a more loyal & faithful employee. The organization dynamism will support me to develop this type of an employee and make him / her competent. I would assume this company will have systems in place to develop such persons. No company would want to take a person who is loyal but incompetent in the long run.

If I was the boss in an organization which is struggling to survive, I will better choose a person who is more competent and will deliver from day 1, otherwise I will be in problem!

Though we have our own personal likes and dislikes, it is the organization's culture, values, priorities, goals, objectives, HR focus that drives employee motivation and growth.

Karen E. Lund

If I could choose only one option, loyalty or competence, I would choose competence. My decision is based, in part, on having done temporary work, where loyalty (in terms of remaining with an organization for a long time) is usually not an option. Under such circumstances, the most "loyal" thing I can do is to do my best work for however long I'm there.

This applies to more permanent positions, as well, I think. If I see a position as a step in my career and am capable of fulfilling my role, I'll do a good job in the hope of impressing both my future employer and my current employer (in the hope of a good reference), and so contribute to my present organization.



It saddens me to see people in jobs for which they are not suited, in either skills or interests, plodding on day after day. They are usually not happy and contribute little of worth to their employers or colleagues. What is often called "loyalty" can sometimes be lack of initiative to explore new opportunities.

Vern Swanagon, SPHR, CTRS, MA

Wow. Great question for today's environment. As much as I am a people-person and a fan of loyal and faithfully attentive employees, I believe that results matter and being loyal or faithful doesn't always translate to business success. Today, being loyal and faithful sometimes gets you a deck chair on a sinking ship or makes you the captain of one.

Being potentially competent is based on results. If you are getting results, and I know your career is your first priority, I manage from that perspective. You may not get my faithful and loyal support. In other words, as a manager I may put you in a job that ensures the company's success and yours at a certain level, but not let you move up or become as integral to the business. You would ultimately betray my trust by moving on so your course is your own. I'm not buying a ticket on that cruise. With this type of employee it has to be win-win; when the balance shifts someone is getting hurt.

On the other hand, if you are faithful and loyal, you might be complacent and in need of a good challenge. A challenge might help my opinion of your competence rise upward. Your ability to tolerate whatever it is that keeps you plugging along is something to be recognized, but not necessarily rewarded. How valuable is someone in today's market who just shows up--that might not be the case with a loyal and faithful employee but it certainly is easier to coast if you feel your passage has been booked. Today's ship needs a working crew.

This is really a hard question and a bit of a moral dilemma. Companies succeed and fail based on their employees. Faith and loyalty in a compromised, often ruthless environment are beacons of hope; competence and the ability to know when to jump ship are survival skills.

In the short-term hire competent employees who can get the job done. Long-term develop mutually rewarding systems so they want to stay in business with you and you want them there.





Miguel Ludert

I think it depends on the role being filled more than it depends on my desire.

I want a director level person and above to be loyal because they have sensitive information and are often client facing. They need to be continuously appraised of information and the direction of projects. With good leadership, this loyal but otherwise mediocre person can shine.

On the other hand, I don't care if my telephone operators leave as long as they do the work well. Even in something more delicate like technology, there are situations where I want a superstar to get a great product out than a long term romance.

Much the same as romance and love, choosing between loyalty and performance is different depending on where you are in your life.

Sridhar Kalyanasundaram

Let me respond with a live story - a bit in reverse of what you have raised:

I had a good dept head under me, a long serving individual in the company, who unfortunately was not promoted in the annual exercise (I was not a member of the panel that decided the list). So, when I questioned the Leader of the Panel, pat came the reply that if the guy was good, he would have had offers from elsewhere and that he was just a loyal guy. Well, as it happened, this guy did get an offer in about 3 months time and he moved on.....only for the same Leader of the Panel (who was his direct boss, by then) trying to stop him leaving saying that after 14 years, one cannot be 'disloyal' to the Organization!!!!

Competence, Loyalty, and other labels that we give the employees are at times relative to our (as in Top Management) own characteristics - and to add, the process is not even consistent - horizontally, i.e. across all employees, and vertically - at all points of time.

To me, a competent crook is more dangerous than a loyal fool. You may not know if the competent guy is a crook or not, but it could be a very costly way to find out.

Engage a very competent consultant for the short-term, if that's the immediate requirement; get the loyal guy to implement and run the consultant's ideas/whatever.





KONATE Omar

Loyalty is probably a very rare quality that is missing to a lot of employees, but also to a lot of companies!

Competence can be developed through experience and practice.

If you need someone for a very precise objective and for a predefined time, it would be better to work with a competent individual.

On the contrary, if you need to invest in the long term, it is strategically to hire someone with a lower level of competencies, to build up progressively his capacities while offering him opportunities to enhance new challenges (loyalty from your company) and you will be rewarded by more loyalty from him/her.

Divya Purnaiya (Parameswaran)

Loyalty is subjective.... for example, Is the guy loyal to you because he is incompetent and therefore cannot really stray? Or is he actually loyal? Either ways I'd go for competency. Work needs to be done today, and in the best manner possible. If there is a choice, pick the person who will do the job well, and he might over time become loyal.

Amal Gupta

I wish the answer would be that simple. It is always need driven. If we see current context especially in human extensive industry such as IT sector, many of the loyalists are being asked to move out under PIP scheme. Competency is the Industry flavour/demand and way to move forward.

At EOD, people feel comfortable with nice, goody people. But competent people are required. More-over stale resources always feel the heat during progression, downturn and always get pushed.





Avinash Singh

If both the employees are part of an organization then how will one justify to the 'high competent employee' that the 'loyal limited competence employee' is also getting the same treatment (in terms of respect, remuneration etc). I will always choose the prodigal son!

Nikhil Mehra

The risk with a loyal and faithful employee is that of complacency and then the risk with a competent employee is that of going overboard. Now if the appetite of the organization is that of a risk averse, a loyal and faithful employee will be better "cultural fit" and if the appetite is aggressive then the competent employee is highly recommended. And yes, competent employees can be made faithful and loyal by showing Trust (give and then take) and recognize the needs (loyalty is a function of satisfaction over a period of time) in timely manner.

Malvina Ashok

I would choose a COMPETENT employee and during the course his/her tenure as a part of my team mentor/guide/help him/her understand the importance of loyalty n faithfulness for a successful career.....

E.g.; Dog is a loyal/faithful animal....but if he is not competent in protecting his master ,will the master look after him..... but the vice versa is if the Dog is competent ,the master will do his best to care/love/train whereby the dog will never think of any other master n will be loyal /faithful to his master ONLY.....

Dinesh Sinha

I will always go for loyal and faithful who has potential to fulfill the role requirements. It is because of such employee organisation development takes place and not because of those competent people who take credit for their work and move to next organisation.



Naveen Bothra

I totally agree with Niall S.

To add, I think it's practically more difficult to retain an employee who has limited competence & potential. You won't be able to fulfill his ambition.

If you have challenging work and employee friendly/matured process, I think the competent person can turn loyal too.

So the decision should be taken based on what you have to offer - mediocre work or challenging work.

Eugene Rembor, MBA

Chrystal clear number one.

Integrity is the most important virtue. What good is a competent employee who might take company insight to the competition to further his career?

I'd rather go with the loyal chap who has the potential. He will be motivatable for times to come, become competent AND offer me his integrity.

Bithika Bhatnagar Trivedi

The way I see it, it depends on 1 thing -

Do you have the time to work/motivate the loyal employee to become more competent? If yes then you must work on the loyal employee and groom him to your requirements. This is something which a leader can do. Also loyalty is something which cannot be ingrained & taught through training sessions so it will be preferred.

However if you have a task to be completed in a given time and delivered a competent employee will be an asset here.





Michel Ragot

I don't think it is the good question. What can you expect from a faithful and loyal employee who is not competent: nothing. You don't need him. But what could you do with a competent employee who is not loyal: nothing too it is too risky for you.

For me to be competent includes being faithful and loyal.

Ravi Kiran

The first...Grooming is more of a manager's job and part of his key skill for team performance. Yes, however the employee should have the right attitude and willingness to learn and should not be resistant to change.

The first race is almost extinct, let us save them....after all they are not Dodos but kids who need the right energy boosters and sync...Handholding would be the right word.

Cristina Mihai

There are three variables I have in mind when picking between the two:

- the time frame, i.e. how long can I count on the HiPo versus how long has the loyal/faithful one been in the organisation (which can give me some insight on whether s/he was adequate for the business when recruited, even if now it's somewhat limited)
- the role of the employee, i.e. how critical is s/he for the business as a whole
- the values on which the business is built, i.e. is it more external oriented or one that places great value on its internal people

And then comes the real thing: letting a loyal, faithful and somehow inadequate person for a role stay in the organisation does not necessarily mean s/he has to stay in the same role! I believe even businesses which place a great degree of emphasis on loyalty cannot afford to endanger the business as a result of this value. Such people can be moved around the company in roles that would better suit them, without breaking the psychological contract.

As for the hypo, the key is talent management, i.e. creatively thinking of ways to keep them aboard and caring for them in such a way that it becomes difficult for them to find better opportunities.

These said, I'd keep the hypo and more around the loyal & faithful one on another job role.



If even this breaks the boundaries of your question, my choice would be to let the loyal & faithful go with a very, very good package. Because businesses are not social services and if businesses don't survive (which usually happens as a result of people with limited competencies to fulfill role requirements), they would still be out, right?

[Nitin Goyal](#)

I do not see it as a very complex question, I think Loyal & Faithful person is what I would choose, following are the reasons:

1. Competency is something that is easy to work on, while core values like loyalty and faith are difficult (just want to avoid impossible).
2. A competent person if not loyal to organization is very dangerous and can be harmful to the organization.

[Abhishek Mittal](#)

I would also choose the high-performing competent person. They are the folks who drive your business outcomes. The challenge, though, is to provide them an environment that is 'continuously' challenging and full of opportunities to maximize their 'returns-on-investment' from the relationship with the organization.

The bigger challenge for companies is to make such high-performers loyal. The practice of employee engagement could play a crucial role here.

[Rohit Jain](#)

A competent employee is always a priority. Making him/her loyal & faithful by providing with right atmosphere and incentives will be my job as an employer. If one can retain a competent employee, it will always be more beneficial to company than just having somebody on their payroll who are just doing enough to satisfy their job requirements.

However, with that said, a company strategy will also determine what kind of employee you would like to hire. For example: In a few companies (e.g. manufacturing) specialized knowledge of the company processes is valuable but the work has high volume and low value. In these types of industries, loyal and faithful worker who will remain in the organization for many years will be preferred.



On the other hand, if your company anticipates a strong growth, a competent employee will be preferred because a competent employee will not only work well but he/she will also set the precedent for new joiners to work at his/her competency levels rather than at barely acceptable levels.

