

Core Question

Doug Barber challenged school leaders to consider a growing workforce reality:

How do independent schools attract, develop, and retain exceptional employees when the expectations and motivations of today's workforce are changing?

Using a framework introduced by SAIS President Dr. Brett Jacobsen, Barber explored the distinction between **Legacy Employees** and **Lifestyle Employees**, emphasizing that most organizations need both, but leaders must understand the differences and manage them intentionally.

Legacy Employees

Legacy employees are motivated by purpose, mission, and long-term impact. They see their work as more than a job.

Characteristics discussed included:

- Mission alignment
- Loyalty and dedication
- Dependability
- Long-term commitment
- Team-first mentality
- Growth mindset
- Passion for the institution
- Desire to leave a lasting impact
- Focus on student outcomes over personal convenience

Barber described legacy employees as people who ask:

"What will my students gain because I was their teacher?"

These employees often help preserve culture, institutional knowledge, traditions, and organizational stability. They tend to view their work as a calling and are invested in the school's future.

Lifestyle Employees

Lifestyle employees are motivated more by balance, flexibility, personal priorities, and the quality of life that work allows them to maintain.

Characteristics discussed included:

- Desire for work-life balance
- Transactional view of employment
- Interest in flexibility and accommodations
- Clear boundaries around work hours
- Focus on current needs and realities
- Expectation that work fit into broader life goals

Some participants described lifestyle employees as asking:

"What do I need to do to get through today?"

However, the conversation challenged whether this characterization is always fair. Several attendees argued that lifestyle employees can still be highly effective, mission-driven, and student-centered while maintaining stronger personal boundaries.

The Central Tension

A major theme of the discussion was whether schools have historically been built on the backs of legacy employees who were willing to do "whatever it takes."

Participants questioned:

- Is that model sustainable?
- Are younger generations rejecting unhealthy work expectations?
- Can schools continue to operate if fewer employees are willing to make work their primary identity?
- Should independent schools adapt their structures to accommodate evolving workforce expectations?

The group repeatedly returned to the idea that the future may require schools to rethink assumptions about schedules, flexibility, compensation, leadership, and employee expectations.

Important Insights

1. Neither Category Is Entirely Good or Bad

One of the strongest conclusions was that employees rarely fit neatly into one category.

Participants noted:

- Legacy employees can become resistant to change.
- Lifestyle employees can bring fresh thinking and challenge outdated practices.
- Both types can be highly effective.
- Both types can become problematic if not developed appropriately.

Several leaders emphasized that employees often move between these mindsets depending on their life stage, family responsibilities, or career goals.

2. Lifestyle Employees Can Improve Organizations

Participants identified several strengths lifestyle employees bring:

- Questioning assumptions and traditions
- Encouraging innovation
- Challenging leaders to justify practices
- Bringing outside perspectives
- Helping organizations think differently about work and well-being

One participant noted that lifestyle employees often ask questions everyone else has been afraid to ask.

3. Leaders Must Develop Both Types

A recurring point was that leadership cannot simply complain about either group.

Leaders have a responsibility to:

- Develop employees intentionally
- Coach mission alignment
- Provide mentoring
- Help employees understand the broader purpose of the organization
- Create pathways for growth

As one participant stated, schools often spend too much time protecting long-tenured employees while becoming frustrated with newer employees instead of investing in their development.

Hiring Implications

The discussion explored how schools might identify these tendencies during hiring.

Suggested interview questions included:

- Tell me about a time you failed and what you learned.
- What would you do if offered this job today?
- What problem did you solve in your previous role?
- Where do you see yourself in a few years?

The goal is not to hire only one type, but to understand a candidate's motivations, adaptability, mission alignment, and growth potential.

Leadership Implications

Barber argued that independent schools face increasing challenges in recruiting and retaining talent.

Leaders must grapple with questions such as:

- How much flexibility can schools offer?
- When should accommodations be made for exceptional employees?
- How do leaders maintain fairness and culture when exceptions are granted?
- Can future leaders emerge from both legacy and lifestyle mindsets?

The consensus was that leadership effectiveness will increasingly depend on balancing institutional needs with changing workforce expectations.

Key Takeaway

The session did not conclude that one type of employee is superior.

Instead, it challenged leaders to recognize that workforce expectations are evolving. Independent schools must understand the motivations of both legacy and lifestyle employees, intentionally develop them, and create cultures where mission, excellence, sustainability, and personal well-being can coexist.

The ultimate leadership challenge is not choosing between legacy and lifestyle employees, but learning how to build thriving school cultures that harness the strengths of both.