

Leadership: The Failure To Motivate Or “Get A Rope”

The trouble with motivation

Grown-ups are suspicious of banners and slogans. They don't go in for orations and cheerleading. They don't like to be asked to do foolish things. Dig a latrine, or do anything humble or disgusting? Let someone else do those jobs!

We see a variety of exhortations here and there in the workplace. We see banners strung from tree to tree at company picnics. We see corporate teams work up a sweat when they compete publicly against one another, as in a three-legged race.

If you go on one of those corporate rock-climbing team-building trips, people who don't say boo to each other at the office are indeed helping one another scramble up a cliff face. That's great. But it's make-believe. It's not the real world. Get those rock-climbers back to the office reality and the old grumpiness, and the old "Have we been introduced?" attitude creeps back into place. Maybe not the day after climbing El Capitan, but soon enough.

"Motivation" has gotten a bad name because of some of these rah-rah gimmicks. The feeling many is that it excites people for an hour, but then the motivation fades away. They say this kind of "motivating the troops" only works for some kinds of personalities, while others find it repellent and childish.

And this is a big problem for people who hope to lead: Getting people to do what you tell them to. Succeed at motivating people, and you are a big success as a leader. Fail, and no one will bother to classify you one way or the other. You will just be another guy who didn't have what it takes to lead. Friends, it's time we stood back and rethought what motivation is.

Can you really motivate others? No. You can't. That's because motivation comes from inside, not out. Think about it. Have you ever received a "to do" (or "honey do") list from your spouse? Or perhaps wrote one for yourself? Do you reliably do the things on the list? Of course you do. Why? Is it because you're afraid of your spouse? (It's a possibility!)

No, not really. You do the things on the list because, once completed, the physical act of crossing it off the list feels good inside. And that's where motivation comes from; the accomplishment of outcomes.

Note something about the chores on that list:

- Rake the yard.
- Paint the banister.
- Open a checking account.

Everything on that list is discreet, doable, and short-term in nature. Therein lies the key to success. High-performing teams almost always work on short-term, continuously high-priority goals and objectives. The size and duration of the task keeps team members motivated.

You don't have to have pom-poms hanging in your office or do handsprings down the corridor to keep people on the ball. You just need to keep people focused on the successful completion of these short-term outcomes.

Two reasons for failure

You assigned Jane a task and a deadline, both of which she has since blown.

There are really only two possible reasons for her failure. The first is that she was unable to do it – a question of ability. The second is that she didn't want to do it – and that is a question of motivation.

You desperately want it to be a matter of ability, because, remember – truly motivating people is a very tall order. Whereas, ability is a managerial issue: you can address it methodically, using a set of checkpoints.

For example: If Jane says, "I wasn't up to it," that's an easy problem to solve. You don't expect to change the person fundamentally, adding twenty IQ points, or injecting a solution that gives them a degree in particle physics, or suddenly making them six inches taller. So you reassign that person to something they are up to -- or you direct them to a different career. Or you train them, guide them, mentor them, give them job learning assignments.

It's not fun, but "I can't do this" has a very clear situation.

In Jane's case, the explanation may be "I didn't do it because I don't speak Spanish." Maybe she was the wrong person to assign to the task for this reason. Maybe it's not too late for her to learn Spanish. Maybe you needed to explain to her that she could do this task entirely in English.

Ability has another dimension: resources.

- "I couldn't do it because I didn't understand."
- "I didn't do it because I needed help."
- "I didn't do it because I didn't have bus fare."

All these are ability problems that can easily be solved: by explaining, by adding manpower, by making a withdrawal from the petty cash drawer. They are the kinds of problems scouts (and good managers) solve all the time.

Then there's:

- "I didn't compile your list because I am drinking a fifth of vodka every night before crashing on my couch."
- "I bus for two hours every morning to get to work, and then I am exhausted all day."
- "My daughter has cystic fibrosis."

These are more serious issues. They include chemical problems, family problems, and situational problems that keep a person from performing. They still constitute an ability, not a motivational issue -- and are still easy to solve, relative to "I don't care if this gets done or not."

Whereas motivation requires you to figure the individual out. It means venturing into Crazy Land, the mysterious eccentric workings of the individual mind. Better to hang a banner in the cafeteria than delve into why when Jane looks up at you she is thinking about her father, and that ain't good. Psychology is a task most of us very sensibly shy away from.

How do you know which it is? Is it Jane's ability or her lack of motivation that brought you to this pass?

Get answers to the following manager's questions, and you will know if the problem is ability or motivation:

- "Did you set clear expectations?"

Did Jane know what she had to do? Did you ask at the time if she understood? If it was all vague, but you didn't quiz her about its clarity, then the problem is not with Jane at all.

- "Did you set goals and objectives?"

Did Jane understand that she had to prepare a written report? If you assumed she understood this, but didn't check to see, the finger points back at you.

- "Did you set a time frame?"

Without a deadline, there is no way to measure success. "Oh you mean you want it now? Why didn't you say so?"

- "Did you establish progress checkpoints along the way?"

Unless your employee is an intuitive genius, who can read your every thought, you need to check in with that person at regular intervals, to ask the telling question "How's it going?"

At the progress check-points, if there is a gap between the estimated and the observed, however, you have found your problem. If the estimated

quality of a task was GOOD, and the observed quality of its execution was less than that, you must ask the person what happened, what explains the discrepancy.

The next words out of the teammate's mouth will tell whether the problem was due to ability or motivation.

Be sure that the answer you want to get, most of the time, is ability, and not motivation. And though these explanations put much of the onus for failure back on you – because you have to train, explain, and supervise your team members -- this is still cause for celebration.

Welcome to Crazyland

The second possibility, lack of motivation, is more serious. It requires you to venture into the individual's inner world, to figure out why this person is being so difficult.

This is not a place you want to be. Leaders are not psychologists, and should not pretend they are. We have seen managers with a book of psychobabble under their belts try to "understand" team members. It is about as graceful a process as squashing grapes in a vat.

But when a leader determines that a performance issue is a motivational problem, leaders are to engage team members in a straightforward process of communicating consequences. These consequences are to be communicated in order, from least threatening to most threatening, until they comply.

These are the four stages of consequences, in the prescribed order:

- 1) to self and job. If you don't do your work, it reflects on your record with us.
- 2) to others (guilt). If you don't do your work, your team mates will have to pick up your slack.
- 3) to boss. I need you to work with me to achieve this goal, or I will fail.
- 3½) Pause ... During which the leader tries to figure out why the team member still hasn't complied.
- 4) the nuclear option. You will be terminated if you do not do as I ask.

The only time leaders are to probe deeper into the individual's personal problems is in-between consequences # 3 and # 4,

This is a journey fraught with scary questions, not least of which are: What right do you have messing around with an employee's psyche? And how much time and energy are you willing to invest in this person who is not functioning? Do I really want to know about any potential personal problems of this particular employee?

Managers are switch-flippers. Leaders look deeper into causes and effects. Sometimes this means taking a peek into a person's heart.

Stewed frogs

There is a famous story about stewed frogs. If you place a frog in cold water and place the pot on the stove, it never seems to occur to the frog to panic and leap out of the pot. Without an alarm going off, he sits – and eventually stews.

This phenomenon is roughly what happens on teams that have purged all anxiety. In a 100% stress-free atmosphere no one is afraid of anything. Then one day the axe falls, or the dam breaks, or fire breaks out, and the casualty count is huge. A little anxiety prompted by good leadership ("If we don't get in gear here, we're all going to be stewed frogs!") would we saved that team.

So we are saying that leader must keep team members apprised of reality. If the water temperature is on the rise, the leader must inform the team of this, and issue orders that allow them to escape unstewed ("Jump, boys!").

Still, this idea rankles many people. It seems harsh, leaders scaring their employees. It may sound harsh, but it is necessary to use a 2X4 occasionally to get one's attention and focus. Leaders routinely venture forth into danger, but at all times the watchword is "Be prepared" just like in scouting. Anticipate things going wrong. The slogan might almost be, "Be anxious." Not in a sick way, but in a clear-headed, realistic way.

What do good leaders do? They tell the truth. They tell it whether the truth is nice, or scary.

The key is to be proportionate. Certainly, never invent danger in order to motivate. That's lying. But don't panic people with the truth, either. Don't make danger out to be worse than it is. But even more important, don't make it out to be less than it is – that is a terrible disservice, lulling the team into a false feeling of safety, just as the temperature around them is measurably rising.

You never know what incentive will work for people. A parking space close to the front entrance. Their name on the bulletin board winner's list. Tickets to see Garth Brooks. Perhaps the most beautiful thing about motivation is that it can be something really stupid.

Yes, they still want what they originally wanted -- to pay the rent, to meet girls, to add a line to their resume. But now they want something more besides. They want to repay your interest in them. They want to thank you for your humanness. They want to deserve your trust. They want to help you to succeed.

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