

## Motivation Mistakes

By Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

How many times a week do you hear, “We’ve got to motivate our people?” This is usually followed by an idea or two to try to entice people to be more productive. Seeking to motivate employees is a thought pattern leaders use every day, so what’s wrong with it?

Trying to motivate workers shows a lack of understanding about what motivation is and how it is achieved. Leaders who think this way rarely get the increased motivation they seek. Reason: Motivation is an intrinsic phenomenon rather than something to be impressed upon people.

The only person who can motivate you is you. The role of leaders is not to motivate workers, rather it is to create the kind of culture and environment where workers are inspired and choose to motivate themselves. An example is when a leader sets a vision and goals, then allows people to use their initiative to get the job done as they see fit.

Why do many leaders try to motivate people by using either incentives (like bonuses) or threats (like penalties)?

1. **Poor understanding of motivation** - The notion that by adding perks to the workplace we somehow make people more motivated is flawed. Over 50 years ago, Frederick Herzberg taught us that increasing the so-called “hygiene factors” is a good way to reduce dissatisfaction in the workplace, but a poor way to increase motivation. Why? – because goodies like picnics, pizza parties, hat days, bonuses, new furniture, etc. often help people become happier at work, but they do little to impact the underlying reasons they are motivated to do their best work.
2. **Taking the easy way out** - Many leaders believe that by heaping nice things on top of people, it will feel like a better culture. The most direct way to improve the culture is to build trust. By focusing on a better environment, managers enable people to motivate themselves.
3. **Using the wrong approach** - It is difficult to motivate another person. You can scare a person into compliance, but that’s not motivation; it is fear. You can bribe a person into feeling happy, but that’s not motivation; it is temporary euphoria that is quickly replaced by a “what have you done for me lately” mentality.
4. **Focusing on perks** - Individuals are willing to accept any kind of treat the boss is willing to dish up, but the reason they go the extra mile is a

personal choice based on the level of motivational factors, not the size of the carrot.

A better approach to create motivation is to work on the culture to build trust first. Improving the motivating factors, such as authority, reinforcement, growth, and responsibility creates the right environment for motivation to grow within people.

How can we tell when a leader has the wrong understanding about motivation? A clear signal is when the word “motivate” is used as a verb – for example, “Let’s see if we can motivate the team by offering a bonus.” If we seek to change other people’s attitude about work with perks, we are going to be disappointed frequently. Using the word “motivation” as a noun usually shows a better understanding – “Let’s increase the motivation in our workforce by giving the team the ability to choose their own methods to achieve the goal.”

For an organization, “culture” means how people interact, what they believe, and how they create. If you could peel off the roof of an organization, you would see the manifestations of the culture in the physical world. The actual culture is more esoteric because it resides in the hearts and minds of the society. It is the impetus for observable behaviors.

Achieving a state where all people are fully motivated is a large undertaking. It requires tremendous focus and leadership to achieve. It cannot be something you do on Tuesday afternoons or when you have special meetings. It is not generated by giving out turkeys at Thanksgiving. Describe motivation as a new way of life rather than a program or event. You should see evidence of motivation based on trust in every nook and cranny of the organization. Focus on improving the culture rather than using carrots or sticks to create true motivation.

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