

## Successful Supervisor Part 30

### *Finding the Key to Motivation*

**by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP**

I love the study of human behavior and have been actively pursuing it for about 40 years. Maybe if the good Lord gives me another 30 years I will begin to understand the subject more fully. Human behavior is as complex and far reaching as any topic I can think of, yet for any manager, and especially for supervisors, the more insight she has the more effective she will be.

A couple decades ago, I learned that the sources of motivation are intrinsic and each person is unique. We can see some general patterns in large groups, but the individual differences swamp any ability to understand what drives a person by looking at the group they belong to. That is why I avoid trying to characterize people by their demographic.

When people ask me how to motivate a millennial, I tell them to stop thinking of the person as an age group and think of him as an individual. When students get into arguments about whether men or women make better leaders, I tell them to forget the gender stereotypes and think about the unique gifts of each person.

I once had a wise mentor, as my direct boss who happened to be a volunteer fire chief on the side. He and I were walking through a manufacturing plant one day and said, "Do you see that inspector over there? He is a total slug at work. We have to light fire crackers under him to get him to even move. He has no motivation at all; but you should see the transformation when he walks into my fire station. He becomes a ball of fire who does extra duty without even being asked."

That conversation has stuck with me for years. The key to motivation is to get to know what lights up a person and find a way to provide more of that element. Using that method, I was able to turn around numerous people who seemed to be lost causes in terms of motivation. I just needed to find out what was in their firehouse and bring more of those elements into the workplace.

If you are a supervisor, try to avoid thinking of all your workers as basically the same. Study their body language and observe what is going on when they get fired up. Talk to people about their hopes and dreams. Find out what they are looking for in life and

show them how you can provide that better than anybody else can. You will see a metamorphosis of motivation that is truly amazing.

Looking for the particular key to a person's motivation takes a lot of work, but it is like fun detective work, and the impact you can have as a supervisor will be huge if you master this skill. Think of yourself as the "Columbo" of your organization; just forget about the cigar.

Don't worry about converting every laggard in the organization. You cannot save everyone. Some portion of people just want to remain lifeless and miserable. Focus your attention on the people you can fire up. In my experience, roughly half of the people who are underperforming can be super stars, if they are properly led. It is your job to make that happen.

When you can take an individual who is basically dead weight or a complete albatross and convert that individual to a sparkling example of motivation, your reputation of being exceptional about leading people will be assured. Have fun with the technique, because only you will know the secret to how you are achieving such remarkable results.

*This is a part in a series of articles on "Successful Supervision." The entire series can be viewed on [www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision](http://www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision) or on this blog.*

*Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP, is a consultant, trainer, speaker, and author in the areas of leadership and trust. He is the author of four books: 1. The Trust Factor: Advanced Leadership for Professionals (2003), 2. Understanding E-Body Language: Building Trust Online (2006), 3. Leading with Trust is Like Sailing Downwind (2009), and 4. Trust in Transition: Navigating Organizational Change (2014). In addition, he has authored over 500 articles and videos on various topics in leadership and trust. Bob has many years as a senior executive with a Fortune 500 Company and with non-profit organizations. For more information, or to bring Bob in to speak at your next event, **contact him at [www.Leadergrow.com](http://www.Leadergrow.com), [bwhipple@leadergrow.com](mailto:bwhipple@leadergrow.com) or 585.392.7763***