

Successful Supervisor Part 9

Motivation

by Bob Whipple, MBA, CPLP

Many supervisors make some fundamental mistakes in the area of motivation, and it costs them dearly. It seems paradoxical that the actions intended to improve motivation actually have the reverse effect in many cases. This article will untangle the complex ball of string known as motivation and look at why it is so elusive for some supervisors.

The conundrum starts with the way many supervisors use the word in day to day conversation (by the way, everything I am saying about motivation here applies to all management ranks, not just supervisors). The word “motivate” is most often used by supervisors as a verb. “ I need to **motivate the team** to get this done by Thursday.” This type of phraseology sounds perfectly natural and, in fact, is the most common form of usage, but it is a huge red flag.

The problem is that when supervisors use “motivate” as a verb, they reveal a thinking process that demonstrates they don’t understand the underlying premise of motivation and how it is created. Motivate is not something you can “do to” someone else. Motivation is an intrinsically generated phenomenon. It is the role of the leader to generate the kind of culture where the employee chooses to become motivated. The drive to want to do more has to come from inside the employee, not be a lay on from the supervisor.

The best advice is to think of motivation as a **result** that will naturally occur when people are properly led. For example, if the supervisor has built an environment where people feel respected and trust is high, then the supervisor is already in the area code of high motivation. On the other hand, if the supervisor has a pattern of telling people what to do, then micromanaging them while they do it, no amount of cajoling or fancy techniques is likely to produce much motivation. It just annoys the employees.

Many supervisors believe that motivation is something that can be bought with favors, bonuses, lax enforcement of rules, or other types of perks for the employees. The truth is that all of these techniques move employees toward lower trust in the end. They may increase satisfaction temporarily, but they will not produce the internal reactions required for higher motivation.

Over 60 years ago, behavioral scientist Frederick Herzberg did a series of experiments designed to uncover what types of things lead to higher motivation in people. He found that material things, which he called “hygiene factors,” often have an impact on employee satisfaction for a brief period, but do little to change the underlying conditions needed to improve motivation. The secret sauce for motivation lies in things like autonomy, responsibility, recognition, trust, authority, and other intangible ways to demonstrate respect and self worth of employees.

To achieve true and lasting motivation within the work force, supervisors need to continually work on a great culture. Make sure everyone knows the values and goals of the organization. Have the employees be part of creating the vision for where the organization is going. Continually work on teamwork and care for each other. Those types of things form a culture in which most employees will choose to motivate themselves.

If there is the slightest hint of hypocrisy within the management ranks, where people hear one set of words but observe something else, it will douse the flame of motivation like a bucket of cold water impacts a lit candle. For example, a favorite value that many organizations espouse is “Our employees are our most important asset.” Well, that sounds really good, but in order to walk the talk, when a business slowdown occurs, the top managers need to sell inventory and buildings rather than furlough workers. Not many organizations actually act that way, so it is unwise to have a value that is contrary to what the managers actually do. Hypocrisy is a cancer that will kill most kinds of motivation quickly.

Another common trap that supervisors make is to treat everyone the same way. It sounds sacrilegious to make that statement, but it is literally true. When you treat all employees the same way, you are ignoring that each person has a different set of needs. The famous basketball coach, John Wooden once said, “The easiest way I can play favorites among my players is to treat every one of them the same way.”

Certainly it is important to enforce rules with an even hand and not favor one person over others, but beyond that, supervisors need to take individual differences into account as they deal with their employees. That means getting to know and respect each one as a person and find out what makes that individual tick.

An example of that occurred early in my career when I was working for a wise manager. One day he pulled me aside and said, “Do you see that inspector over there? We can hardly get him to do anything around here no matter what we do. He is a total slug here at work. But he is a volunteer in the fire house where I am the chief, and the minute he walks into the fire house, he lights up like a Christmas tree.”

The way to get top performance out of each person is to find out what is truly controlling his or her motivation and provide as much of that element as you can. Forget the bonuses, hat days, or t-shirts, etc. and focus on getting to know your people well. Treat them right, and build an environment of trust and respect. You will see motivation unfold before your eyes. Avoid using the word motivate as a verb, because it is not something you “do to” people; it is something that naturally happens when people are well led.

This is a part in a series of articles on “Successful Supervision.” The entire series can be viewed on www.leadergrow.com/articles/supervision or on this blog.

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