

GETTING GOING

Part 1

Where did the ideas come from that people must be motivated by external forces in order to accomplish things, and that the employers' task is to match the right external motivators with the right people to get the best results?

These ideas are so prevalent that we could readily produce a long list of motivating forces, ranging from fear and punishment, through goading and ridicule, nagging and prodding, financial pressure, to stress, not disappointing your parents, competition, praise, incentives and rewards, to honor, glory and fame.

Everyone is in favor of accomplishment, so it's not surprising that people become uneasy when questions are raised about the widespread belief in external motivation. If there were no external motivation, wouldn't people just vegetate? What else would get people going? Shouldn't we be focused on improving the external motivators, not questioning the very idea of them?

Still, there's a Catch 22 to the list of motivators. People don't like to admit that they "use" the negative motivators on others or themselves. And no one enjoys being at the receiving end of any of the negative motivators. People take some pride in offering the more positive motivators. But no one would say that these motivational techniques always work out as expected. Many people find them hollow, after all, and see their perpetuation as a cynical statement about true human values and what really matters.

Here are some examples.

I once worked for a newspaper that initiated a "story of the week" contest as part of a campaign to improve writing and reporting. Non-editorial staff and a panel of readers were asked to vote, every week, for the best story they read in the paper that week. The author of the winning story received \$5 and mention in the company's weekly newsletter. For 22 weeks, the same two people alternately won the award. For the last 18 of those 22 weeks, the editorial leadership kept the contest going by telling other reporters that the two winners would surely "slack off" because they would come to take their reward for granted and rest on their laurels while others would get more competitive and hungry. But the two winners kept on winning and others became increasingly resentful and started to find fault with the "rules". The contest was dropped.

In the 1980's, as many companies faced a need to trim excesses, I was a consultant to a sales-oriented company that had offered fabulous exotic vacations to their top salespeople every year. Clearly, these high-ticket rewards were on an A-list of expenses that could be trimmed. But the managers were afraid to do anything for fear that sales would decline. When we interviewed

people, we discovered that none of the winners believed they would have sold any more or less, whether there was a trip or not. The frequent winners got a kick out of collecting awards at the end of the year, but the fact that they might win had no influence on their day-to-day sales activities. They offered highly individual reasons why they loved selling and enjoyed working with customers.

A surgery client of mine refused to offer potential new partners written contracts or to spell out non-compete clauses or minimum productivity expectations and bonus plans for exceeding them. “If a person is the kind of surgeon I want,” he said, “then he doesn’t need a piece of paper hanging over his head to remind him to go to the operating room and help patients. And if I make a mistake with someone, the contract won’t matter because we’ll find a way to get out of it anyway.” What about bonus plans? “We’ll do well,” he said, “because our calling is to be surgeons and we answer it with our best efforts, not because we’re intent on making some arbitrary bonus number.”

Anyone who has been around business for a long time has heard stories like these. Anyone who’s been around business has heard and seen examples of people who were highly motivated even in terrible work circumstances and succeeded beyond any reasonable expectations. There is a strong body of observable evidence that our ideas about external motivation may be flawed, or at least insufficient.

Recently, I was at a business conference where speakers were bemoaning the difficulty of reaching large numbers of employees who are “present at work, but ‘absent from duty’”. Research indicates this is a significant and growing management problem. Management experts are developing new lists of employer behaviors to motivate and engage such workers. From the perspective of years of experience coaching managers, I don’t think these behavioral exhortations are the answer. I would wager that new efforts will be appreciated and responded to by employees who have always been engaged and interested. I would also wager that they won’t matter much to those who have been at work but “absent from duty” because that very quality – absence – suggests they won’t be able to notice and take in the meaning of what is being done for them.

As long as we believe that low productivity is caused by external factors, and that productivity can be increased by something that is done *to* or *for* those who are not sufficiently productive, I think we are missing the point entirely. If the cause were external, then every work place would have consistent results and every reasonable motivational technique would be equally effective. Either everyone would be impacted positively by constructive external factors in the workplace and become fully productive, or everyone would be impacted negatively by destructive external factors and become unproductive. If external factors held the power to obtain results, the same sets of factors would work the same way for everyone.

The point we are missing is that people can only do what *they* can see to do. It doesn’t matter what other people want them to see or tell them to see. People can only see what they are

thinking in any given moment. It doesn't matter what others want them to think or tell them to think. What they are thinking is unique to them and arises from them. We can address "absence" punitively or positively, but either way, we are failing to recognize that the state of absence is internal to the person experiencing it. It will change when the person has a personal insight that leads to a different internal experience.

Absence on duty is an unintentional state of mind, not an intentional abuse of employment. All of us know that state. It's the way we are thinking when we put something important down, and five minutes later we can't find it. It's the way we are thinking when we make a phone call, then can't remember why we wanted to talk to the person who answers. It's the way we are thinking when someone gives us instructions, and we "space out" in the middle of them and have to ask for them to be repeated. It's the way we are thinking when we start a major project only to discover we're missing some of what we need to finish, and we can't gather the energy to pull things together and keep moving. It's the way we are thinking when our children come at us with a barrage of requests and we can't focus on them to listen or respond appropriately. It's the way we are thinking when we can't stay on track in a conversation with a group of friends, so we drop out of it to drift into our own world.

For most people, that state of mind occurs infrequently and comes and goes. But for people who are "absent on duty," that state of mind occurs daily and is sustained. Their confusion, distraction, inability to concentrate, and feelings of being disconnected from the energy of what's going on around them overwhelms them. They retreat into a fog of unrelated thinking. The more they miss as time goes by, the more deeply they retreat. They put in their time, but the experience is frustrating and not at all fulfilling. They lose sight of the resources they used to tap into to rejoin the present moment and connect.

If we can recall the times in our life when we were "absent on duty," we can recall that we didn't like feeling that way, and we really wanted to be in a different state of mind. We all know, deep down, that when we are "present" we feel energized, productive, involved and spirited. Motivation is not an issue for people who are in that state of mind because that state is filled with creativity, connectedness, curiosity and enthusiasm. We all know, deep down, that those feelings are qualitatively better than "absence", being disconnected from life as it is happening and therefore neither being attuned enough to know, nor being engaged enough to care, about how things turn out.

What everyone wants to learn is why it looks hard to re-connect from the state of "absence", and why it seems easy to be in touch with life from the state of "presence." What everyone wants to learn is how to rediscover presence when it is lost, and how to see absence coming before getting mired in it. The most powerful motivational program that anyone could offer would be one that helps people answer those questions for themselves and find self-sufficiency and know their own resiliency.

See Getting Going, Part 2 to explore these questions.

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