

Motivating

*If you want to build a ship,
don't drum up the men to gather wood, divide the work, and give orders.
Instead, teach them to yearn for the vast and endless sea.*

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

When I was a child I was in the Cub Scouts, and each year my Cub Scout den put on a show. I have no idea why we were doing shows when we should have been tying knots and pitching tents, but that was what we did. I had what I thought was a great idea for the show, and I spent days working out every detail, from the dialog to the casting. On the day of our den meeting, I was so excited that I started my pitch to the den mother as I walked in the door. “Mrs. Smith, I've got a great idea for the show...” Before I was 10 words in, Mrs. Smith (as I will call her) stopped me cold, saying, “that's nice, but we've already got the show worked out.” And, we went on to do the show she had planned, which incidentally I have no memory of, although I still remember my idea in excruciating detail.

I am willing to bet that everyone has had an experience like that, and if it did not make you feel small, unimportant, and demotivated then check your pulse. I knew, even as a small child, that this was not the way to motivate someone. I know now that Mrs. Smith, who really was a very nice person, was not trying to demotivate me; she just wanted to keep things moving in the direction she had set. Her actions were an example of management by objectives at its finest.

What Does it Mean to Motivate?

Common wisdom is that managers are supposed to motivate. So, they try to motivate by dangling cheese, wielding whips, or my personal favorite, standing

in the prow of the boat trying to look like George Washington. The problem is that while it is scarily easy to demotivate a person – even unwittingly, as the Cub Scout story shows – it is not possible to motivate someone else. In the real world people are moved by: *coercion*, which pushes from the outside, and *motivation*, which pushes from the inside. You can coerce people, but you cannot motivate them.

Coercion and motivation may lead you to the same results, but usually there are differences, both in what gets done and in how it gets done. For example, as soon as nearly any degree of coercion comes into play, most people turn off at least some critical faculties. After all, if I have to do it anyway, why should I spend a lot of effort figuring out whether it is the right thing to do or whether there are better ways to do it?

When someone says “Yes Sir!” to me, I get a chill. I know the job will get done, but I also know that if the person doing the job knows a better way of doing it, or sees something I have not noticed, I am not going to hear about it. Plus, that job is going to be done perfunctorily. I would much rather hear, “have you considered this other way of having me do this?” or “are you sure we need to do this?” because that person is more likely to be engaged, and therefore motivated.

Coercion sets up a dependency between you as the “order giver” and the other person as the “order taker.” Someone who is “just following orders” has relinquished his or her independence to the order giver. When a person relinquishes independence, he or she also relinquishes responsibility for the outcome.

This is so common that it has become a cliché. Mr. Dithers tells Dagwood to make a reservation at the fancy steak house for a big customer; Dagwood starts to tell him that the customer is a vegetarian, but Mr. Dithers doesn't listen and tells Dagwood to shut up and make the reservation, so he does and hilarity ensues. The sad thing is that this happens in the real world every day. I have seen otherwise intelligent people do very dumb things and take no responsibility for the outcome, because “the boss told me to, and he knows what he wants.”

Most people are able to manage their home lives just fine. They plan and execute their activities independently. They manage their resources intelligently, maintain their home and car, and invest for the future. Overall, they take responsibility for their actions, and they do their best to improve their lives and the lives of their families without anyone telling them what to do.

Then they go to work and turn into robots for 8 hours a day. The problem is that when they go to work, they move into a more or less coercive environment, and coercion encourages them to turn off their brain and hand over responsibility to the boss. Some of this is inevitable. Unless we are independently wealthy, all

of us hand over a big chunk of our lives to earn the money we need to live. Even when it is a fair exchange, and as a manager you need to do your best to ensure that it is, there is an element of coercion that is unavoidable. Our job as managers is to acknowledge the necessary coercion and do all we can to drive unnecessary coercion out of the system.

Common Demotivators

Since managers do not directly motivate employees, we must instead give employees an environment that to the greatest extent possible gives them control and removes coercion and demotivators.

Common demotivators include:

- ▶ **Not listening:** Pay attention to what people say. Then, if you are not going to take a suggestion, explain why. Not only does this show respect, if you are paying attention you might just learn something.
- ▶ **Being inflexible:** If you are paying attention, the chances are you will hear things that will change your mind. A natural inclination is to resist that change, especially since the idea came from someone else. Resist that inclination.
- ▶ **Imposing arbitrary schedules:** Writers should plan and schedule their own work, and managers should work with writers to accommodate the inevitable externally imposed schedule constraints and avoid adding more.
- ▶ **Taking away power:** Do you insist that writers be in the office at specific hours even when there is no strong reason? Do you write your team's plans and schedules? Do you micro-manage? Do you insist that your team communicate with your manager only when you are in the loop? All of these things, and lots more like them, take away power and demotivate.
- ▶ **Withholding information:** Information is power, and withholding information is another way to take away power. Managers withhold information all the time. Often this is for good reasons, for example, to protect confidentiality. But, most non-confidential information, especially information about strategy and tactics – all the “why” information – should be shared. Besides confidential information, the only other kinds of information I do not normally share are rumors, unfounded opinions, and administrivia, i.e., information that just wastes time and does not add anything useful.
- ▶ **Disrespecting people:** Just because you are the boss does not mean that the people who work for you do not deserve respect. Keeping people waiting, belittling them, or making decisions for them are all disrespectful.

- ▶ **Not leading:** All this talk about coercion might make you think that managers should just sit back and let things happen. Not true. Having an empty suit as a manager is nearly as bad as having Simon Legree. You need to know where you want your team to go, and you need to communicate that with your team.
- ▶ **Personnel craziness:** Every corporation has its pathologies, especially with regard to personnel issues. There will be more on this in other sections, but for now, it is enough to recognize that corporations tend to think that personnel systems like employee ranking, performance evaluations, management by objectives, and this week's management fad are motivators, even though they rarely are.
- ▶ **Market realities:** If things are going badly for your company, or the particular product you support, that is a powerful demotivator. There is not a lot an individual manager can do in this situation, but that does not mean it will not have an impact on you and your team.

Removing Demotivators

The key to removing demotivators can be summed up in the words of W. Edwards Deming, "Drive out fear."¹ Necessary coercion – that which is built into the system or is part of leading – should not cause fear unless you are trying to correct a disciplinary problem. As soon as fear enters the picture, it drives out rational thought and even smart people will do dumb things.

If the people who work for you are afraid to speak up, if they are afraid to point out when you are wrong, or if they are afraid to express an opinion that is contrary to yours, then you have stepped over the line from necessary coercion to unnecessary coercion, in other words fear. While you may have a group that does your bidding, you will not have a group that is motivated to do its best work.

Building a Motivated Team

While removing demotivators is essential, that is not the full story. You need to create an environment where the objectives and priorities of the group are clear, understood, and supported. Then, you need to work with the team to figure out how to reach the objectives. You also need to make sure that the objectives include constant improvement of both deliverables and process. As your team participates in continually improving these things, they will become invested in them and feel increasing responsibility.

¹*Out of the Crisis* [12], p. 59. A must-read for managers.

This is not easy to do. Your natural tendency will be to over-specify the objectives. In Chapter 3, *Power and Influence* (p. 16), I describe a project that included a web interface for engineers to enter information. The essential objective there was to make it possible for engineers to easily enter information. It was not essential that it be a web interface, and it certainly was not essential that it have any particular look and feel, provided it worked better than what they were currently using. Despite that, I had some strong opinions about what the web interface should look like and what features it should include, and I spent a lot of time talking about those opinions with the engineer who developed the page. In fact, I spent way too much time, and the web page took longer to develop than it should have.

The engineer understood that he could meet the essential requirements quickly, and then refine the design over time as he got input from users. Once he got that through my thick head, I got out of the way, and the site was set up quickly. It turned out to be a big win, and the things that I was so worried about got cleaned up over time with little muss or fuss.

The lesson here is two-fold. First, while my objective was sound, I was defining the solution. Even if that solution had been optimal, which it was not, forcing a particular solution was demotivating. Secondly, because I do my best to make my team's environment non-coercive, the engineer was willing to assert himself and get me to see a better way of doing the job. If he had been intimidated and not said anything, we could easily have wasted weeks and at the same time alienated the engineers who were waiting for a solution. A good environment is a safety cushion that can save you when you mess up.

I have found the best strategy is to distill the objectives to their essential elements, then work with the team to fill in the rest. Keep focused on what *must* happen, and let your team figure out how to make that happen. By the way, working together means not just figuring out how to get from place A to place B, but also making sure place B is where you need to go and that there is not a place C that would be a better destination. By getting the team involved, they take ownership of both the destination and the tactics that will get you there, and they will be more motivated.

If you can do these things, then you have got a good shot at having a motivated team. There are still wild card considerations: the company or your division may have dysfunctional management, in which case your best strategy is to keep your part of the organization as sane as possible and act as a buffer between your team and the craziness. Or, you may have an employee who has a talent for demotivating others; in that case, unless that person's attitude changes or you can buffer the group from him or her, you need to get that employee out of your environment. Group dynamics are delicate, and a bad apple really can do serious damage.

But, if you keep the environment un-coercive and supportive, if you define and communicate clear objectives that have been distilled to their essence, if you let the team plan how to reach those objectives, if you are a true advocate for your team with the rest of the company, and finally if you get out of their way and let them take responsibility for their work, you will be rewarded with a motivated team.