Unmotivated Employees and How to Motivate Them

All of us that have struggled with trying to make average employees into good or great team members have spent hours trying to figure how to motivate them into doing a better and more complete job. Over the years I have taken many professional motivation courses and they all have different twists on how to be successful in the process. The concept that I align the closest with based on my training and also my years of leading and managing people, is you can’t motivate employees. I know many of you are saying to yourself “oh gee there goes Mike again off on one of his unusual thoughts and philosophies.”

The theory is you can’t motivate employees over the long haul. They must motivate themselves. You can only motivate yourself. I believe you can assist them by providing the right environment which will allow them to motivate themselves more easily.

Many people consider the following list to be some of the most common and popular motivating factors…

- Pay
- Environment
- Authority
- Responsibility
- Working conditions
- Status
- Teamwork

I question the Pay bullet item because I got an annual performance raise, I would be motivated for only a brief period of time but usually I would slide back into my normal average employee mode after a while. The theory about pay is once you have the basic needs of life, survival money has less of an effect on your work performance. When you are hungry, need a better way of life, or you need shelter; then money can be a powerful motivator. The experts call the money factor a maintenance factor in that it maintains your motivation but doesn't really increase it dramatically.

From the list above I think the most important ones are Authority and Responsibility. These truly demonstrate to almost all employees that they are truly needed in the organization. That their knowledge and performance is critical to the organization and subsequently this motivates them to do more and perform at the highest possible level.

I have always been a big believer in delegating as much authority as possible. The more you delegate your authority to your subordinates the more you will get done, often the work is done
better, and the happier your employees will be. Most employees truly enjoy more authority and they respect you more as the leader for having the trust and faith in their abilities and performance.

Keep in mind, I didn’t say delegate your responsibilities. I believe you can share some of your responsibilities but you can never delegate your responsibilities from yourself to one of your subordinates, the buck has to stop in your lap. Don’t forget when you begin to delegate some of your authority you must install systems to ensure the process is working as you designed it. Remember what President Regan said about the old Soviet Union when they were negotiating the nuclear draw down, “Trust but Verify.” What I mean is don’t set your employees up for failure but put in place the appropriate checks, balances, and audits to ensure everything works well.

One other thing I didn’t mention as a very strong motivator is FEAR. Yes you read me right. In my early years I had a boss, actually the worse boss I ever had, however I learned more from him than many of my other bosses just because I realized if I did the opposite of what he suggested it was probably pretty good leadership advice. This guy would pound his fist on the table, curse at us, and even throw pens and white board erasers at us. Interesting character to say the least! So fear can be a motivator but not a very good one at that and it usually is short lived.

After saying all of that, let’s talk about how things have changed since I started working as a maintenance engineer in 1978. Back in those days we had a pension plan, retirement plans, and health care that continued for life after we retired. Now what do we have? None of the above…unless you work for the government. So one of the new motivators is health care which brings us full circle back to money being a motivator. My wife is considering retiring early which is great but it will probably cost us $12,000 per year to cover the basic health care requirements, this will and is a motivator for many employees and families.

As many of you know who have been reading my articles and tips of the month one of the biggest shortages in America today is the lack of leadership. We have plenty of managers, but very few true leaders. It takes a good leader to properly develop and lead a team of subordinates. This leading and developing includes designing a system, processes, and atmosphere which will allow employees to motivate themselves to the highest possible level.

The key is to constantly lead, guide, and coach to help them be the best they can be. I found an interesting quote about motivation to close the article by Farrah Gray, "Build Your Own Dreams, or Someone Else Will Hire You to Build Theirs."

So your job is….to assist your employees in building their dreams, that’s what a good leader does.