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Going Beyond Motivation to Increase Employee Satisfaction

By **Julius Rhodes**

For years, without much scientific proof, many people bought into the notion that chicken soup was a good remedy for the common cold. At the same time there were also many people who held the belief that there was a therapeutic benefit in the development of children if they were physically held in their first months of birth. Well, as we all know modern science has gone on to prove that those old 'wives tales' are in fact true. Intuitively, I believe that the same thing can be said as it relates to theories of motivation and worker satisfaction. While there are no definitive studies about a happy/satisfied worker being a more productive worker, all that is required to get at this issue is for each of us to look at our past work histories. As a quick mental exercise I want all of you to think back to the individuals whom you have encountered in the workplace who held a formal position of authority over you. I also want you to think back to those educators and coaches in your lives who had a positive impact on your life. What made them effective? What made you more willing to extend yourself to achieve a certain goal for them or to try harder to assist them?

If you are like most people then the answer is simple: they made you feel like you were an integral part in the success of the overall enterprise. They took a vested interest in your success and development and they recognized your contribution to the overall effort. These things were true even during the times when you fell short of your individual goal or even when the team did not reach its full goal. You see good leaders, motivators, educators, coaches, or supervisors realize that by removing the fear of failure and appropriately recognizing the effort that went into the endeavor, they are building a connection that adds long-term credibility and stability to the relationship. Even more, it will foster a can-do attitude that supports the notion that you should always expect people to be better than they are because it helps them to succeed. Chastising team members harshly when they do not reach their goal could discourage them from trying harder next time.

In my former life I worked for a well-known Fortune 100 company. This company's stated goal was to be either number 1 or 2 in every field in which it did business. In one of its operating units they developed a new process that would revolutionize the market place and force all of its competitors to play catch up or face extinction. In all of the laboratory tests, the new product performed well, exceeding all expectations. When the product was field-tested it failed miserably. What do you think happened to the team that helped develop this new technology? Contrary to what you might believe, they were all recognized and rewarded for their efforts. Sure the concept failed in field tests but all of the available information they had said that it would succeed and the team had the full support of the organization.

What does this say about that organization's desire to foster a spirit of achievement and risk appreciation? If we are to grow in quantum leaps versus miniscule steps then we have to motivate our employees so that it becomes second nature for them to always attempt to do the improbable.

This must be done while helping them understand that, as a member of your team, they represent the organization to each person they come in contact with during their working hours and sometimes even after work. This is true of individuals external to the organization as well as co-workers.

This concept is easy to say but can it be practically applied? Yes, it can. Before I provide you with the ways I think it can be applied, I want to first take a brief look at some of the theories of motivation you might have heard. The first theory I want to examine is McGregor's Theory X and Y. This theory essentially states that people (especially managers) identify others in two ways. Theory X employees will need more direct supervision because they by nature want to work as little as possible. Conversely, Theory Y persons are more highly motivated and want to do a good job. Those perspectives influence the working relationship and the potential for creating a proper environment that will allow an employee's inherent talents to surface.

The next theory of motivation is Herzberg's 2-Factor theory. This theory postulates that there are 2-factors; hygiene, which leads to job dissatisfaction, and motivators, which lead to job satisfaction (and contributes to employee

motivation). Hygiene factors include things such as policies and procedures, supervision, interpersonal relationships, etc. Motivators include areas such as achievement, recognition, the work itself, etc.

Another motivational theory that you should be aware of was developed by Abraham Maslow, which he called his needs hierarchy. According to Maslow we need to be able to satisfy lower level needs before we can satisfy higher level needs. The needs he identified from lowest to highest are: psychological, safety and security, social, esteem and self-actualization.

I have mentioned the basics of only some of the many motivational theories available to us. I hope you see why the need to examine the issue of motivation is so critical. While each of the theories provides useful insight into the topic of motivation, I believe that by relying solely on them we can put ourselves in a position where the analysis of the topic paralyzes us. This paralysis then prevents us from moving in any meaningful way to address our employees' needs.

When I think about motivation I try to simplify the process to make it easier to manage. I believe that motivation is a combination of ability and willingness. As employers, we should always endeavor to assist members of our teams with raising their ability levels through training, mentoring and other techniques. However, when it comes to willingness, if a person is unwilling to perform a certain task, it becomes very difficult to make them do so. Where willingness is an issue you have two options: work diligently to discover what levers you can 'trip' to improve willingness or 'cut the person loose.'

An analogy to this would be the following. My children and I enjoy cooking and we are very willing to try new things. However, our ability in this area is limited. Therefore, I have enrolled my children in cooking classes and I regularly watch cooking shows, clip recipes and try new techniques to improve my ability as well as theirs. If my children did not have the willingness to attend classes and my diligent efforts yielded no fruitful results then it would not serve the family to make the sacrifices of the classes and our experimentation. In order to maintain or create a healthy environment for other team members you may have to let unwilling parties seek other avenues to ply their trade.

Now, if you work off the hypothesis that motivation is a function of willingness and ability then how do you determine which amount of each trait a person possesses? Abilities are listed on resumes and in performance reviews, but employees may have more to offer than these documents can tell us. This is where I believe it gets simple *if* you are willing to develop and execute a consistent strategy. To find out how much a person possesses in a given area you must be willing to *communicate* with them.

I have seen many people in positions of authority who understand motivational theory in concept. However, a great number of them try to divine the 'mystery' of employee motivation without so much as having a single direct conversation with the employee in question. The only 'mystery' to this approach is why anyone would attempt to be successful in their relationships with other people without speaking to him or her in an open, honest, and forthright manner.

If you don't know where you are going, then any road will get you there. However, this is not a strategy that will make our organizations better. We must be willing to make the changes that are needed in ourselves that will show others we have an interest in them beyond the mere responsibilities they perform on the job. *COMMUNICATION* is essential to identifying the 'levers' that we need to 'trip' in order to increase willingness and provide us with the knowledge we need to apply appropriate strategies to increase individual abilities.

When I talk about communication I am talking about it as a holistic concept including idea formulation, transmittal, listening (the most overlooked aspect of communication) and feedback. How many times has an employee left your place of employment and told you they were going to receive more money? It is one of the most offered reasons, but rarely is money the most important factor in decisions to leave. In fact if you look at the analysis that has been conducted since 1950, money ranks as the fourth or fifth reason that a person changes employers. Imagine what a manager would learn if they had a relationship with the employee that made it possible to ask the real reasons?

The biggest reasons people leave: because they either don't feel committed to the organization – usually a result of not being or feeling involved on the job – or the work is not challenging or they do not feel they can grow and learn in the organization. I feel very comfortable in saying that most organizations do not fully or even partially utilize the range of talents that their employees possess. It has been my experience that few employers know what activities their employees are involved in at or outside of work. In many cases these activities may be able to help further the mission of the organization.

If you look at most reports of successful airlines these days you will see that Southwest consistently ranks as one of the best. Given that the company pays less than many of its competitors, how does it achieve lower turnover but higher overall employee satisfaction ratings? Southwest encourages the heart of their employees and making the environment challenging and fun. I contend that they can only accomplish this by talking or communicating with their employees on a regular basis.

The more you get to know employees, the more you understand that the vast majority of them want to do a good job. In addition, they have ideas on how the organization can be better. The sad fact is that few of them get a chance to provide their input because no one ever asks and there is an inherent fear in providing information that is unsolicited. Does this need to change? Absolutely! However, if it is going to change then as individuals with positions of authority who are charged with bringing out the best in our team members we must be on the front lines in showing people why the change is needed. We need to do a better job of ensuring they feel as if we are committed to them as persons versus just as an extension to our organizational processes. Communicating, early and often, is the best way of achieving this objective.

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