

Whatever Happened to Motivation?

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Safety is not the only aspect of business impacted by engagement. Recent studies estimate the percentage of workers actively disengaged in their jobs at a staggering cost to the nation in terms of lost productivity and quality.

Not so many years ago, the word “motivation” often was heard in organizational environments. There were plans and programs designed to motivate employees to be safer or more productive. There were incentive plans for executives and managers to motivate increased production, income and profits.

Motivational speakers were in high demand for company conferences and management retreats. Books about motivation filled the business sections of bookstores and often were seen on the bookshelves in the offices of managers and organizational leaders. A strange phenomenon called “morale” was assumed to be, at least in part, the outcome of successful motivation.

While the goals of these motivational efforts were well intended, the methods used often were less than effective. Many programs were developed by business leaders with little to no training in the then current sciences related to human motivation. The sciences themselves were far less savvy a decade or so ago than they are today and led to sub-optimized results. Most motivational efforts utilized incentives instead of simple rewards, which further added to the complexity of the efforts and introduced more ways such programs could go wrong. Many organizational leaders simply would have discontinued the incentive schemes if doing so would not have been unpopular and demotivating. Some stopped anyway, with catastrophic results.

Performance Experts to the Rescue

Performance experts tried to come to the rescue of the motivational efforts by correcting the ineffective practices and offering guidelines for success. Dean Spitzer’s book, *Supermotivation*, stayed on the business bestseller list for eight years. Dr. Spitzer taught organizations to first stop de-motivating, then to start motivating, employees. He promoted the idea of rewards over incentives, which simplified the process and eliminated many ways in which motivational schemes could fail or produce undesirable results. Motivation started to be practical for anyone willing to read and learn. Many organizations became more successful, but others neglected or refused to heed the guidelines and continued to fail.

Then, around the time we were sweating the Y2K scare, Alfie Kohn published his book, *Punished by Rewards*. His treatise was rife with failure sto-



ries about incentive schemes. He not only told of those that did not work but emphasized the ones that backfired and produced unintended negative consequences. Somehow, he failed to find or write about any success stories, which inferred that all such programs were bad.

In fact, that was his premise. He admonished organizations to stop “bribing” employees to do what they were paid to do and to get on with business. His narrative was compelling and his failure case studies were real. Many organizations used this to justify abandoning all incentives, rewards and recognition programs. If motivation programs are bad, then de-motivation must be acceptable. And the removal of motivational schemes, especially those that are financially rewarding or have been in place a long time, almost always is de-motivating.

The Next Wave

The next wave of thinking on this subject took several different directions. One direction centered around the word “influence,” which tended to fill the gap left by removing “motivation.” The approach to nudging workers toward increased performance started to focus on existing workplace factors rather than introducing specific motivational programs. The behavioral sciences came into prominence as managers were prompted to analyze what organizational factors actually reinforced desirable behavior in production and safety and which factors became

barriers to such behavior. The weight of natural, organizational consequences replaced the introduction of artificial consequences as the focus of these efforts. The thinking that “people do things for a reason, and if you don’t change the reason you might not change the behavior” came into vogue. Organizations tried to change themselves to produce the kind of organizational design and workplace environment that would influence the desired performance.

Another approach involved new research into what most effectively increases human performance. The old carrot-and-stick thinking from the motivational program days still was influencing a lot of organizations. Even if it evolved from incentive programs to natural influences, the thought was that influences must reward the desired and/or punish the undesired performance. The new research bore out that this thinking was more or less correct if the performance basically was routine. However, if the task involved even the slightest need for cognitive action (problem solving, analysis, etc.), not only did the idea of

reward and punishment not work, it made performance significantly worse.

Daniel Pink reported on this new research and discussed possible applications of it in his book, *Drive*. The research basically identified three factors that increase performance in cognitive efforts. They were labeled:

Autonomy – the ability to make work decisions and direct your own actions.

Mastery – the opportunity for self-improvement in job skills.

Purpose – working on something viewed as worthwhile or valuable.

The “drive” approach has proven successful in several industries that thrive on creative thinking and is being tried in others.

In safety, we hear the words “motivation,” “influences” and “drive” less often than we hear the word “engagement.” Organizational leaders sense how engaged or disengaged their workers are in safety efforts and look for ways to improve. Employee engagement has various definitions among different organizations and leaders but tends to range from buy-in to involvement to ownership.

But safety is not the only aspect of busi-

ness impacted by engagement. Recent studies estimate the percentage of workers actively disengaged in their jobs at a staggering cost to the nation in terms of lost productivity and quality. Obviously, this problem is on the minds of organizational leaders and is viewed as a necessity for survival.

Safety, like other aspects of business, is dependent on the performance of workers. It has been said that performance is equal to ability X motivation (P=AM). Increasing ability is an ongoing issue that should not be ignored. But, if ability can be enhanced or completely nullified by this multiplier called “motivation,” then it should be a strategic goal of every safety effort. **EHS**

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