



Motivation through fear: How to destroy an effective culture

Utilizing fear is an effective conquering tactic. Fear built the pyramids in Egypt via slave labor working under horrific conditions, constantly under the confirmed threat of physical abuse, imprisonment and even death. Civilizations were conquered through fear, thus resulting in the creation of impressive empires of the past. Is it our goal to conquer employees? I would argue that fear is the oldest approach to human motivation. While it might work to move an organization from dismal in safety performance to average, it is the most ineffective approach to achieve and sustain excellence in culture and performance.

Certainly discipline has a place in performance management when an employee is malicious in their actions, or flagrantly violating an established rule, policy or procedure. Unfortunately, administering a negative consequence such as termination of employment when performance fails to improve, regardless of coaching or counseling activities, is sometimes necessary.

Discipline and other forms of negative punishment are elements of performance management. Managing performance in

others requires a balance of consequences to ensure required behavior, such as those necessary to be in compliance with government agencies and company policy. Moreover, performance management is an excellent tool to achieve the expected performance necessary to remain employed in an organization. However, when employing the traditional and visible approaches, a balance of consequence can be limited in the results to inspire others to provide discretionary effort.

Several well-intentioned leaders have taken great steps to establish accountability for performance within their businesses. While this has led to value in some companies, what sometimes follows is the unfortunate creation of additional rules, narrowly-defined performance expectations and clearly documented consequences for failure to meet certain behavior or result expectations. Furthermore, many of the desirable expectations are written in a way that states the desirable goal in the negative, thus telling a person what not to do. What often follows is aligning people in supervisory positions to constantly assess

their people to see if they are behaving in a way consistent with the stated expectations. This creates a culture that is working very hard to hold each other accountable for not failing. How motivating is this?

If you want to change performance in another person or a group of people, you must first understand the reason for the undesirable performance. If you do not address or change the reason, you will not have sustainable performance improvement. Yet performance influence is hard, and it is easier to try to create new rules and hold people more accountable.

In his thought-provoking article, "The Folly of Accountabalism" ("Harvard Business Review," February 2007), author David Weinberger writes, "Accountabalism manifests itself in a set of related beliefs and practices: It looks at complex systems that have gone wrong for complex reasons and decides the problem can be solved at the next level of detail." He goes on to write, "Accountabalism tries to squeeze centuries of thought about how to entice people toward good behavior and dissuade them from bad into simple rules by which

individuals can be measured and disciplined. It would react to a car crash by putting stop signs at every corner."

Most companies have progressive discipline procedures. I have yet to find a progressive positive reinforcement policy.

Next month, I will share a proven effective and internally-implementable approach to move from motivation through fear of failure, to one inspired to achieve success. In the meantime, ask yourself: Do I want my employees to work under a predominant mindset of failure avoidance? Or do I want to create a culture that understands consequences do exist, yet employees are intrinsically motivated to work together to accomplish success? To achieve sustainable performance you can't have it both ways.

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