

Public Praise and the Dangers of Demotivation

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Incentives, rewards and recognition are all difficult to implement well. Most people struggle. A principle that all effective leaders eventually learn is what motivates one person will often demotivate another.

Motivation is an internal state of being; it is intrinsic. Individuals either feel motivated or demotivated. You create the environment or situation in which someone feels one way or the other.

Many who recognize this feel the best route to a motivated worker is to praise in public – but they are wrong. Even with our best intentions, what we do to publically recognize someone for desirable performance just might result in unanticipated consequences.

One fall weekend in 2008, while enjoying a weekend between projects in Europe, I found myself traveling on a train between Zurich and Luzern, Switzerland. Shortly into the trip, I overheard a nearby family speaking English, with a North American accent. I decided to introduce myself.

The family, originally from America and now living in the Middle East, had also decided on a vacation in the beautiful countryside of Switzerland. The husband, David, was enjoying the opportunity to be a stay-at-home dad to their then, 11-year-old daughter, Elizabeth. David's wife, Catherine, was vice-president of human resources for a global company with operations in the Middle East. She had recently become significantly demotivated.

Catherine was exceptional at her job. She was able to accomplish what no one in her position had before. To achieve these accomplishments, 2007 became a busy year for her. Hundreds of thousands of air miles and multiple elite statuses obtained in worldwide hotel chains later, she found herself at a global rewards ceremony to honor the company's top talent in the summer of 2008. As any business woman struggling for recognition of effort among her male counterparts, Catherine was honored to be one of the key recipients that evening.

Catherine had no hesitation standing and presenting in front of an audience, although being recognized publicly was new for her. Knowing that her boss, a great inspiring leader, would be introducing and recognizing her provided a further calming effect. Sitting at her table, she reflected on her accomplishments while thumbing through the note cards she had carefully prepared for her acceptance speech. Knowing any moment she would need to stand to approach the podium, she steadied her nerves.

Minutes later, Catherine remembers her boss at the podium reflecting on the many things she had accomplished the previous year. Believe me, it was impressive. Seconds before Catherine was to be asked to join him on stage to accept the reward, her manager said the following, "In order to achieve all of these feats, Catherine had to be on the road for us two-hundred and five days last year! Let's give her a round of applause!" As she slowly arose from her seat and made her way towards the podium, 'two-hundred and five days' kept ringing in her ears. Catherine's motivational bubble had just been burst. While proud of her successes, she had not realized what it had cost her.

I was fortunate to have Catherine and her family over to my home for dinner a few months ago. She was kind enough to fill in the details of this event and the resulting decision she made. Catherine accepted a

lower-level position in the company and she and her family now reside in Texas. She is enjoying spending more time with her family and making up for lost time with her daughter, Elizabeth.

Sometimes when we recognize the performance of another, if we are not careful, we might end up demotivating the person we mean to motivate. When this unfortunate consequence occurs, it prompts the recipient to try and not achieve the recognition later. Let this not encourage you to refrain from recognizing performance. Realize that motivation is important. Just proceed with caution if using prescriptions and strategies that are predefined.

What motivates one might demotivate another. Realizing this is step one. Determining how others like to be recognized is step two.

I have been fortunate to have worked with great leaders who recognize the importance of identifying how others like to be recognized, then developing a plan to do so. Motivation is critical, but we must remember that we can't motivate another person; it has to come from within oneself. We have to make sure the motivational situation results in the desired response. It is just too important to take lightly. Your people are worth the time to do it right.



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