

# People Leave Managers... Not Organizations

## Chapter Two: Motivation at Work

*Courtesy of:*



"There is so much apathy around here I'm getting to the point where I just don't care anymore!"

—anonymous manager

## Beer Bust and Softball

Early in my career, I was assigned to manage an industrial facility that had a reputation for poor performance. My task was to turn the place around. My organization was very helpful: a couple of organizational development specialists were assigned to assist with some interviews during my first two weeks to collect data about the issues at this facility. After the data were formatted into a 200-page report complete with executive overview it was apparent that there were three 13 major problems: (1) lack of employee morale, (2) extremely low productivity, and (3). disrespect for authority.

It was very useful having this two weeks' worth of work condensed for my analysis. However, I also remembered my first day at the facility and what I learned from simple observation. Reading what was written on restroom walls indicated a low level of morale, reviewing the lapse in any preventative maintenance program foretold of poor productivity, and the cynical comments and rudeness from employees hinted at a lack of respect for authority. Nonetheless, a two-week, 200-page report that validated my perceptions was a benefit that no manager could ignore!

At the time, I had had all sorts of supervisory and management training on how to lead and manage people. I knew from seminars and from the popular management books that the job of employee morale fell into the lap of the manager. Over the years, I had seen manager after manager be called upon to raise morale at the first sign of unhappy employees. The popular theme from the books was "happy people are productive people;" the seduction of this phrase was too tempting to resist. My mission was clear: if we were going to be productive, we must begin by building morale. So my challenge unfolded in the typical manner.

With the assistance of one of the organizational development specialists, we had a management team meeting to determine the first steps in building organizational morale.

We brainstormed many ideas, put posters all over the room, sent some ideas to "parking lots" (wherever those lots were), and debated and discussed various approaches for hours.

In the early afternoon, one of my junior managers came up with the idea of having a beer bust and softball game for everyone. Upon hearing his idea, my own motivation and morale began to climb. I love softball and beer. This was a great idea, and one that nobody could possibly argue with. Since I was the leader and had veto power over ideas, I immediately declared this to be our first step. So it was to be, a beer bust and softball game for all.

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### *A Lesson*

*There is only one thing worse than a disgruntled, unmotivated, sober employee: a disgruntled, unmotivated, drunk employee with a baseball bat!*

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Of course we had to order people to attend, which I now look back on as an interesting morale issue itself. I must have been insane, believing that anyone could mandate fun, not to mention mandating high morale at work! In carrying out my plan to win people over with my morale

boosting day, I learned a leadership lesson that has been with me ever since and has forever shaped my thinking on the issue of employee motivation.

Looking back, I now understand that this morale boosting attempt was nothing more than a bribe. And people know when they are being bribed! Many didn't come to work the next day (hung over perhaps...gosh, should have held it on a Friday!). Morale, productivity, and respect did not improve in any way. And to make matters worse, employees demanded another beer bust and game a couple of months later!

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### *Another Lesson*

*Morale isn't something that can be bought. The work environment has to provide people with opportunities to success, to do their best, to be trusted, to be valued, and to be respected. Then morale and productivity can take place.*

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To be honest, I was angry, angry with the employees at their ungratefulness. I gave them a morale day and they gave me back nothing and demanded another beer bust and game. It wasn't until several months later, failing in every manner to make a positive impact at my new facility, that I began to see the error of my ways. The beginning happened after work one day when one of my mid-level managers (who had been there forever) decided it was time for a talk. He told me that I couldn't buy motivation or productivity. He said what the people needed was what had been taken away over the years—involvement, participation, a sense of achievement and contribution, and appropriate decision making and control over tasks and assignments.

I would like to say that the facility was turned around quickly with this insight. However, the destruction of trust and the manipulation that had happened made the process of change require a couple of years to complete. Over time, however, a huge leadership lesson was learned. By giving people their jobs back and creating a work environment that provided meaningful participation and dignity to everyone's job, things began to turn around.

## **Moments of Insanity**

When we look at the traditional carrot-and-stick theory of motivation, we must admit that it does not work well, if at all, once people have reached an adequate subsistence level regarding their needs. Beyond health, food, clothing, and shelter, people tend to be motivated by higher level needs. Management cannot provide people with the respect of others, self-respect, a sense of achievement, or pride. It can only create working conditions that provide opportunities for people to seek these things out for themselves. Why then do we continue to try to bribe or punish our way to superior performance? There is certain insanity present when we attempt to do something with a practice that won't work.

To understand what truly motivates individuals to do their best, to give their discretionary effort, we must acknowledge that many of the past accepted motivational practices are in direct conflict with human nature. In many cases, the application of these practices is akin to digging channels uphill to increase the water flow!

For example, a manager identifies performance difficulties with employees. Knowing that the employees know how to perform the tasks in question, the manager assumes a motivation problem and begins to apply motivational techniques in order to improve performance. What to do?\*

- Donuts in the morning?
- A Friday pizza party?
- An employee of the month program?
- Letters of recognition?
- Monetary awards?

\* Hopefully not a beer bust and softball game.

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*Recognition is a motivator...*

*but it lacks impact when respect, trust, personal contribution, and meaningful participation in the work are missing! Perhaps management uses recognition first because it is easier and doesn't require looking in the mirror!*

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All of these choices assume that people need to be fixed—that there is something wrong with them. Where is the evidence? Where is the test of that theory? There is no evidence or test—only managerial knee-jerk assumptions. Any of the above choices won't work (although the goodies will be accepted by employees), because none of these changes any elements of the work environment.

Let's review the beer bust and softball game scenario to critique these motivational practices. By choosing a beer bust and softball game to solve the morale problem, the unquestioned cause-and-effect determination is made; namely, the cause of low morale was the absence of beer and softball! We can cite for certain that we have never heard employees complain that the cause of poor morale was the lack of beer and softball. However, by applying the prescription (beer and softball) to the situation (low morale), a remedy was used that had no relationship to the cause of the situation! This approach is insane, malpractice indeed!

Understanding cause and effect is the managerial leverage when attempting to manage and inspire superior performance. Jumping to a conclusion based on assumptions about cause and effect will provide the manager with a much worse situation than the one being affected. By using the beer bust and softball game approach, management was allowed to ignore the underlying working conditions and relationships that were in fact (and most often always are) the cause of the poor performance situation at the facility.

Do we really believe that lack of goodies is the reason that people don't give their best effort at work? Do we really believe that recognition and praise for performance can instill pride when people don't own the work they do, aren't involved in a meaningful way, don't feel respected and trusted, and don't feel they personally influence the outcomes of their tasks or assignments? Let's stop this insanity and begin to dig deeper to understand the true nature of people's motivation in the workplace. Rick Tate and Dr. Julie White 17 Recognition is a motivator... but it lacks impact when respect, trust, personal contribution, and meaningful participation in the work are missing! Perhaps management uses recognition first because it is easier and doesn't require looking in the mirror!

## **I Mean You No Harm**

Years ago, David Berlo suggested the phrase "I mean you no harm" as advice to management regarding the type of work environment that is conducive to high performance. The phrase came from trainers at Sea World who, when asked how

long they swam with new whales in the pool before the training began. replied, "Until the whale knows we mean it no harm." They know that, once whales believe that they are in an environment of no harm, they will relax and perform. This concept seems so fundamental and obvious. Perhaps it is because of this that we so often overlook the signs of harm that work life can communicate to employees.

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### *I Mean You No Harm*

- *Trust*
  - *Respect*
  - *Equity*
  - *Dignity*
  - *Fairness*
  - *Sincerity*
- 

Now we know that reality prevents managers from "swimming" with their employees before job responsibilities begin. However, managers can commit to removing the harmful elements of work life so that fear, intimidation, and overt stress are eliminated. Managers can begin to build relationships with employees that are grounded in trust, respect, fairness, equity, dignity, and sincerity. Regardless of how many goodies management provides to motivate or reward people, these treats fall flat without an environment of no harm. No amount of money (although gladly accepted) can make up for a work environment that lacks the necessary manager-employee relationship qualities. And beer busts only serve to accelerate the blatant complaining about the poor quality of the workplace.

Managers need to adopt an approach to managing people that says, "I mean you no harm." This is the foundation for motivation and desire at work. The manager's creed should be to never do personally anything that will destroy trust, suggest favoritism, show discrimination or disrespect to people or their jobs, or communicate insincerity.

## **The Law of the Hog**

There are consequences for neglecting the work environment and the performance and motivational issues necessary for meaningful participation. Years ago, a friend named Kerry Patterson wrote an article entitled "The Law of I Mean You No Harm Trust Dignity Respect Fairness Equity Sincerity 18 People Leave Managers...Not Organizations! the Hog." While he was conducting interviews during a consulting contract with a lumber company, evidence of employee mistreatment, both physical and verbal, came to light. The employees, working for a company in a remote location in an environment sort of like a company-owned town, were apathetic about

their situation, realizing that they had no other employment choices. However, during one interview with a 20-year employee on the mill floor, information was shared which shed more light on the intolerable leadership situation.

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### *The Law of The Hog*

#### *Predictable employee behavior as a result of mistreatment and nonparticipation*

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This employee said the way the employees got back at management was to “feed the hog.” Now the hog was a big piece of machinery, with large sharp teeth, that ground scrap lumber into sawdust. (Visions of supervisors being thrown into the hog appeared.)

The employees would find ways to get good raw product into the hog when supervisors weren't looking. Sometimes there was competition among employees, with the winner (the one who got the most good lumber into the hog) treated to beer by other employees at the local saloon after work. Doesn't this seem like performance management—the most lumber into the hog (goals and objectives), who got the most in the hog (measurement), and beer for the winner (reward for outstanding performance)?

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### *The Hog*

- *Organizational sabotage*
  - *Stealing*
  - *Shrinkage*
  - *Malicious compliance*
  - *Vicious compliance*
  - *Poor attitude with customers*
  - *Absenteeism*
  - *Quit and stay*
  - *Quit and leave*
- 

When you think about it, every organization has a hog. Shrinkage, organizational sabotage, stealing, and absenteeism are forms of the hog. Malicious compliance, doing only what you are told to do—nothing more nothing less—is a form of the hog. Vicious compliance, doing exactly what you are told, with enthusiasm—when you know it will fail—is a form of the hog. And the hardest one to measure—poor attitude with customers—is another form of hog behavior. The degree to which the hog gets fed in organizations is a result of the quality of leadership and management practices. The Law of the Hog Predictable employee behavior as a result of mistreatment and nonparticipation.

Patterson's article identified the hog as a metaphor for predictable behavior when people feel mistreated, disenfranchised, and nonparticipating. Because of the predictable nature of people under these circumstances, it is an organizational law. Fail to attend to the performance needs and meaningful participation of others and be prepared to face the hog.

## Productive People Are Happy People!

Beer busts and softball games don't motivate people to do good work. Employee of the month programs raise more cynicism than productivity. The hog gets fed in spite of monetary bonuses or profit sharing. The challenge is clear: motivation to perform comes from within, and that motivation won't be bought with extrinsic and material lures. And if there is a bribe involved, the unintended consequences are profound. Bob Nelson, noted author and expert on rewards and recognition refers to the bribery technique for motivation as "wreck ignition." We concur!

The motivation to perform comes from a work environment that allows people to be productive, to achieve, and to participate in a meaningful manner. The research, both empirical and face-valid, has long supported this notion. For example, Fredric Herzberg illustrated the difference between what things turned people off (dissatisfiers) and what things turned people on (satisfiers) in the work environment. His landmark work indicated that the absence of dissatisfiers did not lead to satisfaction and motivation, only resulting in people being "not dissatisfied." His research indicated that people would be dissatisfied (unmotivated) when issues such as pay, status, policies, working conditions, and interpersonal relations were in question. However, he noted that performance motivation (satisfaction) comes only with the presence of the ability to achieve, challenging work, increased responsibility, opportunities for growth and development, and recognition for accomplishment. A critical conclusion can be drawn: happy people are not necessarily productive, but productive people are happy.

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### *Indicators for Employee Productivity and Retention*

- *Clear performance expectations*
- *Materials and equipment to do the work right*
- *The opportunity to do what I do best*
- *My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person*
- *My opinions count*
- *In the last seven days, I have received recognition for good work.*

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Herzberg's work was validated later by Lawrence Lindahl. When Lindahl posed the question to managers about what they believed motivated employees at work, the managers responded with issues of pay, bonuses, benefits, time off, and such. When Lindahl posed the same question to workers themselves, the responses were much different. Workers responded with issues such as making a difference, responsibility, challenging work, achievement, and recognition. Again, the message is clear: the road to happiness at work is through productivity and performance.

Recently, the Gallup organization cites key indicators that lead to employee productivity and employee retention. These indicators are all related to performance issues and the means for employees to do good work and contribute. There is nothing in the Gallup research that validates extrinsic motivation techniques as the leverage for superior performance, productivity, and retention.

In the face of years of research, you may wonder why we continue to ignore what we know to be true. Perhaps it is because many books and seminars still put forth axioms that lead us to

believe that the road to superior performance is through morale lifting programs. Perhaps it is because it is easier. Focusing on building a performance environment where people's contributions make a difference, where people have the conditions that allow them to be their best, and where employee involvement is routine requires attentive leadership that takes time, patience, and practice. It is much easier to simply throw a party!

## **So, Beware the Seduction**

Let's be clear, there is nothing wrong with a beer bust and softball game; it just doesn't motivate people to perform well. Why? It's ineffective because its absence is not the reason that motivation to perform is lacking. When a motivating environment is created, people enjoy a party or get together, of course, but as a "thank-you" or a "breather." However, when the party is used to get something from employees, it not only fails to work, but it usually backfires, making things worse.

There is nothing wrong with praise, recognition, and rewards; they just don't motivate when they are used to get something in return (i.e., strings attached). When people are contributing and productive, then praise, recognition, and rewards that are used as a sincere thank-you and a show of appreciation for good work already performed are welcomed. The trick is not to confuse the parties, praise, recognition, and rewards with the practices that lead to the type of performance that deserves parties, praise, recognition, and rewards.

The confusion can lead to work conditions that not only do not improve performance results, but make matters worse. Consider employee-of-the-month programs. Our experience with employee assessments indicates that these programs not only fail to do what they are intended, but create undesirable emotions in the workplace. The following example serves to illustrate our point.

While checking into a hotel on a business trip, we noticed twelve pictures (employees of the month) in a circle on the perimeter of a nice mahogany plaque behind the front desk. We consider these situations as research opportunities; the dialogue with the young lady who checked us in went as follows:

Motioning to the plaque behind her, *"Is that your company recognition program?"*

Turning and looking and then responding with little emotion, *"Oh that, yea."*

Noticing that all twelve pictures on the plaque were different, *"I wonder if you would mind if I asked a question?"*

*"Sure."*

*"Can you tell me why no employee has his or her picture up on the plaque more than once?"*

Looking at us as if we had just arrived on the planet, *"Well, you can't win it more than once."*

Asking in a curious manner, *"You mean no matter how well you perform, you can't win it more than once?"*

Responding as if we were totally clueless, *"Sir, what makes you think this (pointing at the plaque) has anything to do with performance?"*

Still curious, *"Well, another question then...that picture in the middle of the twelve, the employee of the year...you would think to win employee of the year you would have to be good enough to have won employee of the month in at least one month!"*

Shaking her head, *"Probably just his turn."*

And still pursuing obvious answers, *"One last question...how do you win these awards?"*

With a blank expression, *"I really have no idea."*

Let's analyze this conversation. Management creates a program, employee of the month, to single out and recognize outstanding performance. The people who receive the reward don't believe the award has anything to do with performance. The outstanding employee of the year didn't perform well enough to win employee of the month in any one month. And people don't know what the criteria for winning the award might be. This is not a recognition program—it a program for creating cynicism! Again, insanity rules the day.

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#### *Your Recognition Programs*

- *Can people win more than once?*
- *Does it recognize those who help and assist?*
- *Do people know the criteria for winning?*
- *Is it a thank-you or a bribe?*
- *Does it foster cooperation or competition?*
- *Is the winner's circle restricted to a population of more than one?*

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Now you might be thinking that we merely ran into a disgruntled employee. Well, this lady had a great attitude and her performance at the front desk was above average. But really, to rationalize this situation by focusing on the employee's reaction is to deny the morass of evidence regarding programs of this type. Look around and see all the plaques that have outdated pictures (the program died on the vine) or that have not been kept current. Talk to employees when you run into these programs and elicit their reactions. No, this is the norm; it is not unusual.

Not only that, organizational leaders are constantly calling for more teamwork and cooperation between employees. Then they create recognition programs that single out employees for recognition. Do we really believe that performance by individuals in an organization is done without the help and assistance of others? Do we really believe that we have the kind of metrics that allow us to determine who is best in most jobs in any one month, much less for any one year? Why do we cry out for cooperation and then continually create programs that celebrate individual performance at the expense of others, restrict the winners' circle to one, and influence employees to compete against each other for limited recognition? Do we really believe this creates the kind of emotions and behaviors that lead to superior, team-oriented performance?

At Sea World, there is no Whale-of-the-Month program. The conditions are set up for each whale to perform at his or her best. They do. Each whale understands what is expected, the

materials and equipment are provided so each whale can perform at his or her best, instances of recognition given for good work are always much less than seven days apart, and there are trainers who truly care about the whales. There is enough fish, squid, and recognition for every whale, and it is well earned.

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#### *A Leadership Method That Influences*

- *Superior Performance*
  - *Employee Initiative*
  - *Individual Responsibility*
  - *Achievement*
  - *Contribution*
  - *Accomplishment*
  - *Growth and Development*
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Organizational performance is the measure of leadership. Within ethical and legal boundaries, managers and supervisors are tested on how well they inspire and influence the performance of their direct reports. In looking at managerial ability, the test is clear. Can employees perform well, stand on own two feet, achieve, contribute, and make a difference? Is managerial recognition of employee performance based on employee accomplishment, not a bribe for future performance? To create a motivating performance environment, managers need a leadership method that influences individual responsibility, superior performance, and meaningful contribution.

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