

Lessons in Leadership: “Let’s Talk About Motivation”

by William W. McCartney

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What are the driving forces in your life? Do you want the same things today that you wanted ten to fifteen years ago? For that matter, do you want the same things from your work situation that your employees want? Has the current economic downturn caused you or your employees to re-think priorities? Is it tougher or easier to lead under the current economic conditions? These are tough questions with complicated answers but ones that need to be considered if you expect to be a successful leader in difficult times.

Do your employees want the same things from their jobs that you want from yours? Are they all motivated by the same rewards? The answer to these questions is complex and depends greatly on the number of employees involved, where they are in their career path, and their personal and professional aspirations. Obviously not all employees are the same, and for sure they are not all like you. Some employees are risk takers while others are more cautious; some want independence while others need close supervision; and some are motivated by tangible rewards while still others are looking for safety and security. One of the biggest mistakes leaders make is assuming that employees equally value rewards and that those rewards are the same ones they would want in similar circumstances. If you want to have an effective motivational program, then you need to find out what’s important to your employees. You do that by talking to them about their long-term goals and by observing their behavior on the job. Once you have a good understanding of their needs, then you can develop your motivational program. A good rule of thumb is to treat them all the same to the extent they’re the same and differently to the extent they’re different.

I remember interviewing for a job, as I was about to graduate from college some years ago. I had a technical degree from a respected university and there were a lot of good job opportunities. During the employment interviews, I remember being told about retirement plans, health and life insurance programs, and long-term disability benefits. As I listened to the recruiters, I was usually thinking, “How much will I get paid? And how often”? You see I was in my early twenties, in great health, but with no money in the bank. At that time in my life, money was very important to me. Today, if I were looking for job I would certainly ask about salary, but I probably wouldn’t be interested in a company unless they had a retirement program and good insurance benefits. I’m a different person today and my priorities have changed. I expect that the change in priorities that I experienced over the years is typical of most individuals. For leaders that want to have a better understanding of motivation, this is an important lesson.

Do the current economic conditions make it easier or harder to manage? I believe that leaders, if they were so disposed, could worry less today about employee motivation and satisfaction than they have in the past due to the current economic climate. With unemployment at record levels and new layoffs being announced every day, very few people are complaining about their jobs. However, sooner or later the economy will turn around and employees will once again focus on quality of work life issues and job satisfaction. Good leaders will understand that these conditions are temporary and they have a unique opportunity to build loyalty and trust during these difficult times. Leaders who are empathetic, honest and fair with employees will find that their behavior will pay huge dividends down the road. So resist the temptation to do less as a leader, just because you can, and instead use the current climate to build a solid leadership foundation built on trust and mutual respect.

Cut to the Chase:

- Motivation is complex
- Priorities change over time
- Work to build trust and mutual respect