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Want to Motivate Employees? Don't Treat Them Like Children!

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A critical element in motivation

A great deal has been written about how to motivate your workforce, and there are many valid ways to go about it. One method, however, is so simple and effective that it's hard to understand why many companies miss out on applying it. I had it focused for me when talking to an employee in a Fortune 500 who shared his frustration that his organization, he said, "hires smart individuals, and then treats them like children!" I forget what the exact grievance was in that case, and it doesn't matter; anyone with corporate experience can easily think of suitable examples. The guy was referring to lack of empowerment, to over-control, to not letting employees down in the ranks act autonomously on their knowledge and insight, to requiring managerial supervision of everything. Like you would with a small child.

Such an over-controlling culture can do considerable damage to business results, but here I want to focus on its effect on the employees. It is hard to overstress the motivational impact of not being trusted to act like a responsible adult. This attitude, whose presence employees can sense instantly, is demeaning, insulting, and undermines employee performance in multiple ways. People will develop an attitude to reflect and justify the mistrust directed at them, forsaking initiative and innovation and doing their job at its minimal specification. The better employees, those who would normally drive the entire organization forward, will find this so frustrating – like the guy I was talking to – that they will ultimately leave the company to seek an employer able to appreciate their ability to act like adults.

On the other hand, if you empower your employees with explicit autonomy and trust, they will move mountains for you. Nothing can motivate more than the knowledge that you're being trusted and relied upon to decide what's right as you do your job; the more you're trusted, the higher your motivation.

Consider an experience from the very start of my long career at Intel corporation. I had just been hired and relocated to train on the job in a plant in the US. I was young, new to the industry and as green behind the ears as can be. Two weeks into the job I had an idea for an innovative experiment that could easily fail and that required risking a significant sum of money in materials. I was taken to the department manager, who heard me out and then asked me: "are you sure you want to do this?"

I was, and he signed for the money, and the experiment was a success, but what really mattered to me was the fact that although he knew I was a new hire, this manager considered my judgment – what I wanted to do – to be the deciding factor. I was flattered more than I can say; and as I learned that this was a key part of the culture in my new workplace, my loyalty to it was set for a lifetime.

I was to retell this incident for years – it had become a defining moment for my relationship with the company, and a source of deep pride in being a participant in such a culture.

Over the years I've seen this happen in many workplace contexts. I've seen organizations where employees are given trust that stretches them to the limit; I've seen others where nobody is trusted. The results are inevitable: more trust and delegation of responsibility leads to more motivation, to more capable employees, to better retention, to improved business results.

How do you go about applying this concept?

This trust in the employees' maturity can take many forms. Management should:

- Give employees considerable latitude to make decisions related to their job, and to execute them with minimal approval loops. Allow them to seek advice, not ratification, from their direct manager – if they deem it necessary.
- Minimize review and approval processes. Obviously a decision to spend a million dollars would still require review; but even then, make the approval at the lowest possible level, and once approved, allow execution without further red tape.
- Give employees latitude in deciding what they will spend their time on – even beyond the immediate tasks at hand. Google and 3M famously do this, and reap the rewards.
- Involve lower-level employees (together with the usual senior folks) in the discussions that define and evolve the company's mission statement, goals, and strategies.
- Permit and encourage every employee to communicate with whoever they deem useful, ignoring departmental silos and lines of command.
- Allow employees to communicate directly with customers, business partners, and their external professional community – using any channel they find useful, including external blogs and social media.
- Lastly, constantly and actively seek **new** ways to empower employees as conditions and needs change!

Of course, before setting people free to act autonomously, you must provide education about risks, implications, and sensible guidelines – for instance, a clear policy on social media involvement must be communicated before you encourage uncensored blogging. But once trained in the guidelines, people should be proud in the knowledge that you trust them to apply them sensibly on their own. Like grown-ups.

Note that this applies to managers as well. Nothing can be more demotivating to a first line manager than being deprived of the right to approve – on their own judgment – the activity of their team. Having to admit to a subordinate that you, the boss they trust, are powerless to make decisions is the ultimate insult.

All this involves major aspects of the corporate culture, and it is important that these aspects be publicized and appreciated by the employees. Having a local manager that empowers you can create loyalty to that manager, but having an explicit empowering corporate culture will create loyalty to the company as a whole, which is far more powerful. It will also become self-perpetuating, because once the culture is empowering, people feel free to instill it in the new employees they hire and train.

It isn't easy for management to adopt a culture like this, especially in a rapidly changing world. When new possibilities open up, the immediate tendency is to over-control, in order to prevent any risk. I've seen this happen repeatedly as companies confront new work modes like Telecommuting ("What if they just goof off at home instead of working?!") or use of Social Media ("What if they blog something defamatory on the company blog?!")... Yet risk-taking is key to progress, and employees can and should be trusted to navigate risks responsibly. The question then arises, what will happen when some employee makes a mistake? (Which someone will, sooner or later). The answer is, you contain the damage and move ahead; the net benefit will still be definitely positive.

The implications for Gen Y employees

So, what of Generation Y? These younger folks are famously low in commitment to any long term employment... do they view empowerment differently? On the contrary. The human need for empowerment is universal, and if anything, Millennials will have higher expectations, and will respond to being treated like children more harshly than their predecessors. With their intolerance of arbitrary authority they expect to have more input into big decisions and to be free to make the smaller ones. In fact, I can see them expecting a higher scope of trust, because unlike previous cohorts they own not just their immediate job role but also their career; an employer will have to adapt to this fact by enabling them more than ever to navigate their own career within the company as they feel best.

Of course, this does not mean you should throw young recruits in the water and let them swim; millennials definitely need mentoring and advice, and appreciate receiving it. Just remember the distinction between advice and control.

The interesting question is not how you might empower younger employees relative to existing paradigms and tools (you have no choice there, anyway); it is how you can anticipate their needs for freedom and trust vis a vis new, **future** paradigms as they come into being. This calls for open discussion and diligent sensing; let the employees tell management what the new expectations will be. Assuming, of course, that they trust their managers to be better than children...

As you may have discerned, your author is highly motivated to see these ideas widely applied! If you wish to discuss their implementation in your company, do [give me a call](#).

Nathan Zeldes has been leading improvement of knowledge worker effectiveness for 20 years, at Intel and for other companies. He's exchanged knowledge with scores of organizations worldwide, and has founded the Information Overload Research Group, which he chairs. He now [advises managers](#) on improving their groups' results through improved tools and work processes.

For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see [here](#). You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.

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