

A Better Way of Motivating People

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I happened to be in a call centre on pancake day. What were the team leaders doing? Tossing pancakes and arranging pancake tossing competitions. Why does this happen? The only answer can be that such activities are meant to cheer people up, for otherwise their lives are a misery. The events of pancake day were just a single example of a 'motivational' event. In call centres we see team names, team games and so on; the creativity of call centre managers appears to know no bounds when it comes to inventing silly things to do. For that is what they are. However, speak this way and you'll be labelled a trouble maker. It is a relic of the 'air punching, you can be whatever you want to be' American-style rah rah culture that first got the call centre industry a bad reputation some ten years ago. The trick of these cultures is to create 'in' and 'out' groups and woe betide you if you are in the latter.

The tricks and games are no more than an attempt to hide, disguise and not talk about the misery of working in a call centre. In earlier parts of this series I have looked at the causes of misery. In this article I shall suggest better ways to motivate people in call centres, but first I ought to mention the other ubiquitous 'motivator' - incentives.

'Do this to get that' is the modus operandi of the incentive. If only managers knew, incentives always get you less. Psychologists will tell you that if you give two groups a task, giving an incentive to one and not the other, the group with the incentive stops when a break is called while the other group carries on with the task. Why is this? Because for the group with no incentive, the task has become intrinsically motivating. Incentives - extrinsic motivation - take away pride in doing work away; they take away the sense of the work itself having value.

And so it is in call centres, incentives cause call centre agents to do whatever it takes to achieve the incentive, regardless of the impact on the customer or the organisation. I never cease to be amazed at agents' ingenuity when it comes to getting the most from incentives. It is a tragedy that the same ingenuity is not harnessed in to doing and improving the work.

It could be, but only if managers are prepared to re-think the way work is designed and managed. The primary hurdle is measurement. Work measures in call centres are based on 'production'. The measures are used by managers to make judgements about people and because the measures ignore variation (discussed in the previous article in this series) the relationship between the manager and agent is psychologically unsafe for the agent.

By contrast, when call centre agents have measures that relate to purpose in their hands such they can control and improve the work, motivation is intrinsic - they become proud of what they achieve. You get access to the brain that comes free with every pair of ears. This is to use measures as feedback rather than for judgement. Feedback implies that both manager and agent feel psychologically secure in the knowledge that any changes in the measure will reflect a change in the system - the way the work works and not, as is currently believed, the agent.

This, for most call centre managers, is spooky stuff. But even spookier stuff is to come. For to work in this way also requires managers' roles to change from 'judging through the hierarchy' to 'contributing to improvement', for the managers' work becomes taking responsibility for fixing all the things that are beyond the agents' control that are affecting the way the work works.

It is as Fred Herzberg has said repeatedly in the Harvard Business Review (his article has appeared four times to my knowledge), you CANNOT motivate employees. It is a common conceit amongst managers to believe that you can. However, you sure can DE-MOTIVATE employees. And the fastest ways to do this are separate decision-making from work, have managers make decisions on arbitrary measures, hence make the employee feel psychologically unsafe and prevent the employee from contributing his or her talent. In call centres we have got the lot.

Imagine a call centre where the work is controlled and improved by the agents and managers' work is determined by what the agents need that is beyond their control. Everybody is contributing, everybody is learning. Service improves, efficiency improves, but best of all morale improves for the most important source of human motivation - pride - is being brought to work. All you have to do is be prepared to change the way you think.

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