

Turning the Cycle of Failure to the Cycle of Success

By JoAnna Brandi

While talking with a friend recently the subject turned to management skills and motivating people. I had just returned from a conference that covered that topic so I began talking about some of the successful motivation programs that had been discussed.

She interrupted my rather excited ranting and said. "Didn't you know we have a motivation program going on in our company right now?" "Wonderful!" I answered. "Oh, yes, we even have a motivational slogan. We hear it all the time from top management". By now I'm really getting enthusiastic and can't wait to hear all about it. Then she said, "Yes, it's truly motivating. 'You ought to be glad you have a job' is our slogan."

Several weeks later I called her at the office only to find she had quit her job of well over ten years.

Organizational attitudes that de-value the contribution that employees, people, make to the successful operation of a company are downright shameful. But still, poor attitudes toward people are still rampant in American business today. That should surprise everyone, since people are in such demand.

Poor treatment still exists and even those employees are expected to take good care of the company's very important assets - the customers. Seems to me that some of the poor service we receive as customers could be a direct result of some of the poor support people get from their employers. Employers need to take notice. The true cost of turnover is staggering and more far reaching than most believe.

John Nathan, who produced a video on customer service with the Harvard Business school speaks of a "cycle of failure". Dissatisfied employees lead to high turnover which leads to dissatisfied customers, lower profitability and back again. The reverse is true as well, the "cycle of success" had satisfied employees leading to lower turnover which in turn leads to better satisfied customers, higher retention rates and higher profitability. That makes everyone happy. In order to produce success companies have to focus inward to their employees first.

There are a number of things that can and should be done to facilitate success. Empowerment, enfranchisement, self sufficiency, and job ownership all motivate employees to do better but all of those require a fundamental change in the belief systems, and change takes time. What can be done to begin the process and keep it going while you are working on the structural changes in the organization? A well structured, change specific motivation program is a good start. By working on behavioral changes at the same time as belief changes you are approaching the situation from two fronts at once.

Remember Abraham Maslow's theory of motivation (I think it was "Psych 101")? Maslow's pyramid of psychological needs provides us with insight on ways to motivate people to work harder, longer and more intelligently. It is divided in five levels.

Level One: Physical comfort...the need for food, drink, clothing and shelter. This level is usually fulfilled through ordinary compensation. Level Two is the need for security from physical and economic danger. This level is fulfilled through fringe benefits, retirement plans, social security etc. Level Three is social acceptance: the need for love, togetherness, teamwork, and recognition. This level is partially satisfied by work which provides an opportunity to gain recognition from families and friends. This level is never entirely fulfilled because people will constantly seek social acceptance. Level Four is esteem....the need for honor, job importance and title. This is seldom totally achieved as a result of normal job activities. Level Five, Self realization, is the need for fulfillment potential. This includes the lofty lifetime aspirations which are seldom totally filled but can be favorably influenced through gradual attainment of the other need levels.

According to Maslow, we are motivated by unfilled needs. Since the first two need levels are generally satisfied they offer employers little motivation potential. The highest need level, self realization is influenced gradually and not immediately. Therefore the greatest motivational potential lies at the esteem and social acceptance levels. These are the levels where you can best fill your employees needs with planned motivation programs. Pure cash awards seldom work to motivate in programs. Cash is a satisfier not a motivator and it usually gets spent on some every day necessity and is very easily forgotten. Programs that offer a combination of recognition and tangible awards work the best to motivate in specific circumstances.

Suppose you need to reduce the accident rate in your warehouse, increase attendance in your data entry department or measurably increase your customer satisfaction rate. Suppose you wish to get more ideas on cutting costs or increasing productivity from your front line staff. A motivation program that is well designed to increase and reward the **specific** behaviors you want repeated (not just some vague aspiration) can be remarkably and quickly successful. Since most companies have inadequate communication and feedback systems many valuable thoughts and suggestions from the people who really know what's going on --your employees-- go unvoiced. American Airlines "Ideas is Action" program has been so successful throughout the years that it now has six full time administrators!

Motivating employees seems to be topic on many managers minds today. We need to understand how to motivate in the positive. We must stop motivating with negativity. The "You ought to be glad you have a job", "My way or the highway" attitudes have to go. (And they are not gone YET!) How can anyone expect an employee to take good care of a customer and nurture the relationship when they feel de-motivated, de-valued and uncared for? Speaking of "Psych 101" class, remember the story about the boy who kicked the cat? Make sure your employees aren't kicking the customers. Take good care of them so they can take good care of the customers.

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