

Stop worrying about employee engagement; hire self-motivated people instead

There's a philosophy out there that you can motivate almost anyone to do their jobs. It suggests these people are like puppets or robots and we can get them to do whatever we want. It implies we can motivate someone, as well as take away their motivation or de-motivate them.

Although this viewpoint is typically well-intended, it is counterproductive to greater success.

For starters, it does not foster greatness. Rather, it fuels a belief in personal powerlessness. It causes people to rely on others to do for them what they won't do for themselves. It usually lacks consequence, and it rarely leads anyone to actualizing their full potential.

It also implies that people can have control over us. It's the ultimate blame game: "I didn't get good results because my boss inadequately motivated me, so it's not my fault." Just thinking about it makes me feel heavy with responsibility for other people's success, or like a victim who has not been motivated sufficiently to achieve greater success.

My question: Why do we want to take responsibility for motivating someone who isn't? Don't we have enough responsibility already? Why do we want to fuel this notion that anyone is powerless or has control over another human being? After all, being unmotivated doesn't work for us, why should it be okay for anyone else? It appears, however, "unmotivated" has become almost socially acceptable simply because it has become so tolerated.

Managing vs. hiring

The philosophy of "motivating the unmotivated" has also made how we manage more important than who we hire. It causes us to focus on finding the most effective motivational tactic rather than the best hiring practices.

We think we're already doing a good-enough job at selecting the best when in reality that's not the case at all. If you look at the fact that employee engagement is one of the hottest topics in the 21st century, you realize that there is an epidemic problem regarding unmotivated employees.

Step One for creating a highly motivated organization is hiring highly motivated people. If we're truly hiring self-motivated people who are passionately driven to find solutions, overcome obstacles and achieve goals, then we don't need to motivate them.

High Performers don't need a perfect work environment to produce great results. They don't become less motivated when the goal seems impossible, but instead, they become more motivated.

Their motivation doesn't wax and wane depending on the size of the obstacles that blocks the path of getting to a goal. They don't whine about what's stopping them. They find a way with the budget, people and resources that they have.

At least that's true for the high performers. It's a very different story for those who aren't highly motivated. These are the people, on the other hand, who can do a reasonable good job as long as it's easy. But as soon as a challenge pops up (personally or professionally) their performance becomes more like a rollercoaster ride—sometimes up and sometimes down. It's when it's going in the downward direction or has parked at the bottom, that's when “employee engagement” becomes especially important, along with implementing a regimen of motivational tactics to improve productivity and results. Let's be clear...these aren't the high performers despite doing well on good days.

Perhaps a better label for “unmotivated” employees is ineffective or less effective at dealing with challenges. It's this ineffectiveness that is the real reason why they're unable to achieve many of the goals that their high performer counterparts accomplish.

The belief that unmotivated employees were good hires who became demotivated is changing as well. As this way of thinking falls by the wayside, so are these old-school business practices that produce limited results:

- Managers are seen as employee motivators.
- How you motivate is more important than who you hire.
- When hiring, “skill” matters more than someone's level of self-motivation.
- To improve overall corporate performance, only post-hire issues are addressed.

As this new understanding of achievement gains momentum, leadership is placing a higher value on hiring. In fact, fewer than 20% of all interviewers have had any kind of formal training on how to hire. And job applicants, unlike any other time in history, have learned how to ace an interview...while the interviewer's skill has remained relatively unchanged for the past decade.

The bottom line: We don't do anyone any favor operating under the philosophy “I have power over you to motivate and demotivate you...because you don't have this power for yourself.” It is this belief that fans the flames of powerlessness and victim-mentality. It creates cultures of mediocrity. It does absolutely nothing to help people discover their real power they possess within inside themselves to create amazing results.

By hiring those who are truly high performers and rejecting those who are not, our focus will begin shifting from employee engagement to maximizing quality-of-hiring and high performer retention.