What is the motivation trap?

Stephen R Balzac

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There is an apocryphal story that goes something like this:

> *The famed psychologist William James Hall was once disturbed by a group of kids playing loudly below his bedroom window. Attempts to get them to play somewhere else failed. Eventually, the good doctor hit on a clever solution: he told the kids that the noise reminded him of his childhood, and paid them each fifty cents to continue playing outside his window. The next week, he told them he couldn't afford fifty, and dropped the payment to forty cents each. There was some grumbling, but, overall, the kids were happy to accept the money. This continued for about a month, with the payment dropping every few days. Eventually, Dr. Hall paid them a dime each, and told them that the next week they would only get a nickel. Infuriated, the kids stormed off, leaving him in peace.*

Although the sums of money are very different, this same phenomenon is all too well-known to managers and CEOs. Businesses attempt to motivate employees with raises and bonuses. It works for a short time, but very quickly the reward or raise has to increase to produce the same level of motivation. When it doesn't, employees frequently lose motivation and the best employees may leave the company for other opportunities. An alternate solution, not providing raises or bonuses, produces much the same results, only without the period of improved motivation.

The problem is that you have created a transactional, *quid pro quo* relationship. The bonus or the raise is presented as the goal: do this work well enough, get this prize. However, once someone attains a given goal, attaining the same goal a second time is inherently less interesting. Some managers decry this as laziness: in fact, it is efficiency. Evolutionarily, the animal that uses less energy to attain a given number of calories has a selective advantage over one that uses more energy: the first animal has more energy available for other tasks, such as running away from a predator who wants to eat it for dinner. Humans are remarkably efficient.

Furthermore, as challenges are overcome, people naturally seek greater challenge, with a corresponding expectation of greater reward. Consider an athlete who wins a small, local tournament. After a few wins, the local competition becomes boring. There is also an expectation that the reward for winning a more difficult competition will be greater than that for an easier competition. The same applies in business: with harder work, there is an expectation of greater reward; when the reward stays the same, but effort increases, a feeling of diminishing returns is created. That feeling reduces motivation.

In a quid pro quo transaction, you are not looking at loyalty or long-term relationships. What you have is purely a fee for service arrangement. Motivation only lasts until the next reward or paycheck. Think about going to the doctor today: that experience is all too often a quid pro quo arrangement. For those of you who had the experience of a family doctor when you were growing up, someone who recognized you and appeared to genuinely care about you, which was the more satisfying experience? Even when we hire consultants to help out our business, most of us want to work with someone who appears to care about more than the money.

In our example, Dr. Hall first tried to force the kids to go away. That failed. Eventually, he established a transactional relationship, in which they made noise in exchange for payment. By paying them in the first place, Dr. Hall shifted their goal from playing in a particular place to making money. Once he made money the motivating force, he had control over them. He could easily reduce motivation by reducing the money, until he eventually destroyed their motivation to play near him.

If you allow your goals to become all about obtaining short-term rewards and if you allow the relationship with your staff to become short-term transaction oriented, then you are falling into the motivation trap. When you view people's time as a commodity for which you pay them, you are falling into the motivation trap. You will be forced to spend ever more effort, create ever greater rewards, in order to simply not fall behind.

That, as the old saying goes, is no way to run a railroad.

Rewards and Feedback

Successful goal completion requires that you have clear, specific, measurable objectives and some means of determining that you're making progress. The ability of goals to motivate is dependent upon there being feedback during the process. Without feedback, it's impossible to tell how much progress you are making, and hence how far you have come. Looking back down the mountain to see how far up you've climbed is always more encouraging, more efficacy building, and therefore more motivating, than looking up to see how much further you have to go.

Checklists are one very powerful tool for maintaining a sense of progress. There is something visceral about being able to mark things off and see the list of accomplishments grow. How strong is this need to feel accomplishment? Oddly enough, saying to yourself that you are half done with something increases motivation far more than if you say to yourself that you only have half of it left to do. The two phrases may be mathematically equivalent, but they are not emotionally equivalent. Mr. Spock might not care, but the rest of us do.

You’ll also recall that the high performance cycle (HPC) uses the internal and external rewards resulting from goal accomplishment to build job satisfaction. Job satisfaction leads to increased commitment to the company, and hence an increasing willingness to accomplish the goals of the company. In other words, job satisfaction leads to goals becoming ever more relevant, which increases motivation to accomplish them and increases your personal sense of your ability to tackle ever harder goals.

Therefore, your mission is to structure rewards as feedback on goal accomplishment, not as the goals themselves. Since most organizational goals are long-term, lasting one, two, or more years, providing frequent feedback is even more essential.

Thus, when announcing a reward or even a raise, you need to place the event in context. Whether you do this in public or in private, highlight the accomplishment and remind everyone of the vision of the company. Connect the dots: explain how the accomplishment ties directly into the company’s vision and how the person being rewarded helped move the company towards its overall goals. The reward is a thank you for advancing the company’s goals. It is, quite explicitly, feedback that you are moving in the right direction.

Look for opportunities to celebrate progress. Again, a key point of maintaining goal motivation is recognizing success. You want to build the psychological momentum of victory.

Conversely, it’s important to reframe failure. Failure has its own momentum, and it’s not one that encourages people to work harder. Persistent failure discourages people and reduces motivation. Reframed, failure is just another form of feedback. When something doesn’t work, you’re being alerted to a potential problem. Failure gives you the opportunity to review your goals and figure out what’s going on. When you develop the habit of viewing failure as feedback that lets you move forward with greater precision and confidence, you are less likely to be caught in a defeatist mindset and more likely to maintain the momentum of success.

Threats, warnings, and intimations of disaster if people don’t work harder do not create motivation. They might create fear and people might act out of fear. Eventually, though, people get tired of being afraid. The threat loses its power to evoke a reaction although it does leave people feeling insecure. When people feel insecure, they are less likely to remain with your company and are easier to for competitors to lure away. When the disaster doesn’t strike, trust in management and the overall vision of the company are undermined. As children, we all heard the story of the boy who cried wolf and what happened to him. Don’t be the CEO who cried wolf.