

What Volunteerism Teaches Us About Motivation

By Terry Barton

As a trainer and teacher, I regularly facilitate courses about leadership or management. Often the discussion circles around to motivation and how managers can motivate their employees. There's always someone that says "the only way to motivate people is through money; the more you pay them, the more motivated they will be". Of course this comment triggers me to demonstrate my expertise by pulling out my toolkit of motivational theories, all of which move us toward some philosophical discussion that only serves to confuse the class and eat up time in the agenda.

Recently, when faced with this situation, instead of reaching into my toolkit, I posed the following question to the class: "If it is true that money is the only thing that motivates people, then how do you explain all of the work that gets done by volunteers?" Faced with blank stares, I asked "Do any of you volunteer?" A roomful of hands when up, so I asked "If you're not getting paid, then why do you do it? What motivates you to give your time freely?" As you can imagine I received such answers as; I believe in the cause, I enjoy helping others, I learn from the experience or I am making a difference. Flipcharting the responses, I went a step further and asked the class what happens when they volunteer, do they have a set role or responsibility or does it vary? Again, I captured the answers, sometimes they were given roles and sometimes they had to pitch in and do whatever was needed depending on the organization or the task at hand. Pleased with where this was going, I went further and asked; "Is this productive, does the work get done?" Again, the class shared examples of people coming together for a large project or giving their time to complete regular duties. Most generally felt their organizations accomplished what they needed to. Continuing, I then asked, "What does this tell us about motivation and how can we apply it to our jobs?"

The room was quiet, finally the silence was broken, someone said; "You have to care about what you're doing and you have to know what the goal is and you have to know that what you do is appreciated and that everyone else is working for the same thing." Someone else added, "And you have to be able to see what you accomplished." Imagine my delight; they had answered their own question about how managers can motivate their employees. Our discussion continued as we delved into just how managers can help employees understand the goal, appreciate what they do, see what they accomplish and ensure that everyone is working toward the same thing. In its simplest form, that is the key to motivating people; making the connection between the work they do and the reason why they do it. Think about that the next time you need to help someone get motivated or you feel de-motivated yourself.

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