

MOTIVATED TO STAY

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Everyone wants to win! One of the most coveted titles we seek is “winner.” This is a universal truth. My business and pleasure travels have taken me to 50 different countries – from Russia to Australia. I have conducted management training with as many as six nationalities and three different translations in the same workshop. Believe me, EVERYONE wants to win.

In business, winners share two essential characteristics: One, they are well-trained and, two, they are highly motivated to use those skills. Winners are high performers, and high performers are who you want – and want to keep – working for your organization. Management literature is rife with articles bemoaning the pain of high personnel turnover that is whittling away at the bottom line; poor retention can threaten the very survival of your enterprise. In this article, let’s examine how training and motivation combine to create a powerful force for improved employee retention.

First, let’s clearly differentiate between education and training. Education is the transfer of concepts and principles. The output of education is knowledge. Most often, the education process usually takes place in a classroom setting; we demonstrate our knowledge by taking exams and discussing the concepts verbally or in terms papers. Training, on the other hand, is the transfer of skills and usually takes place on the job. The output of training is performance or the ability to do a task.

I personally learned the difference between education (knowledge) and training (skills) more than 50 years ago during my U.S. Air Force pilot training. Half the day was devoted to classroom activities where we learned the concepts and principles of aerodynamics, weather, engine performance, aircraft systems, etc. We demonstrated our understanding on test papers, and our grades reflected our knowledge. However, we also spent half of each day strapped in the cockpit of a jet aircraft where we learned, through instruction and practice, the skills needed to take off, land, fly in formation, handle in-flight emergencies, etc. With each flight, we developed our skills and confidence and, yes, experienced the sheer joy of putting a complex, high-performance jet plane through its paces. We also learned another classic truth that performance is skill-based, not knowledge-based. There were a few students who made top grades in the classroom, but were never able to master the skills needed to fly the aircraft safely. They are not pilots today. The mere fact that a person knows and understands what to do does not necessarily mean s/he possesses the skill to do it.

Years ago, I heard the best definition of training: “Training means to make proficient through instruction and practice in a climate of high self-esteem.” This definition supports another truism that has stood the test of time: People learn more, learn faster,

and make fewer mistakes when their self-esteem is high. Here, we begin to see the subtle bridge between learning more skills, faster (training), and high self-esteem (motivation).

Bridging the Gap

Most supervisors have their current job because they excelled at their previous position. They might not represent excellence in their present job if they were promoted a few days ago, but chances are they were experts at their former one.

Now that everyone knows you were very good at your previous job, I want to offer you a challenge that will change you as a supervisor and dramatically enhance the performance of your organization. Starting today, you should do everything in your power to ensure the person in your previous position is better in that job than you were when you were promoted. Many people feel they have satisfied their obligation when they have trained their replacement(s) to be as good as they were. Yet truly great leaders make sure their replacement is even better. The skills that resulted in your high performance are the same skills your people need to become high performers (winners). Share your lessons learned, even those embarrassing ones, so that they can “stand on your shoulders” professionally. Make sure they go home each night a lot smarter, more proficient, and, therefore, more confident than when they came to work that morning. How does the average person respond to such a work environment? S/he tends to “hang around” for years and years and years.

Despite the tremendous improvement in employee morale and retention this practice creates, I have met many managers/supervisors who appear to base their egos and entire self-worth on feeling superior to their subordinates. To feel good about themselves, the supervisors operate with the mistaken logic that “If my people know what I know, then they will not respect me for my superior knowledge and skill.” Not only is this thinking flawed, but it is also totally counterproductive.

The vast majority of winners I have met had bosses who had come to the key insight that “What my people do (their performance – good or bad) is my job, my responsibility.” These outstanding leaders and supervisors are comfortable with the notion that when their employees are very skilled, confident, and motivated high performers, it doesn’t hurt their leadership credibility but, rather, enhances it. Credibility is one of the key essentials of outstanding leadership.

To emphasize the critical relationship between training and motivation, let me stress two key considerations. First, excellent training is inherently motivational, and it works in a cycle: People are normally motivated (willing) to accomplish tasks for which they have outstanding skills. The skills and motivation create good performance; the good performance is reinforced by praise and recognition. These positive consequences stimulate additional performance, which enhances confidence and, hence, motivation.

Second, you cannot motivate an untrained person. On occasion in my workshops, I use this exaggerated example to drive the point home. I will ask those in the audience who

are pilots to raise their hands. Then, I approach someone who did not raise his/her hand (a non-pilot), with this proposition: “I own a high performance experimental aircraft. Its cruise speed is 250 miles per hour. I will drive you to the airport and give you the aircraft keys. If you fly my plane today, solo (no one else in the plane) for 30 minutes, I will give you \$10 million in cash” (extremely positive motivational consequence). “However, if you fail to do so, I will put you in prison for the rest of your life!” (extremely negative motivational consequence).

An awkward silence usually follows. Positive consequences, such as money and rewards, are highly valued; negative consequences, i.e., reprimands, punishment, injury, are naturally feared and unwanted. But both are motivating forces. The group clearly appreciates the fact that the person is not going to perform (fly the plane). Regardless of the extreme motivational consequences, the person does not have the necessary skills. As I mentioned previously, excellent training is inherently motivational. Unfortunately, the converse is not true. No matter how great the value or fear of consequences may be, neither will develop skills. That task is the sole domain of effective training. Motivational consequences only work when the requisite skills (in this case, pilot training) are in place.

Invest Now or Pay More Later

The above example illustrates why many organizations falter when management decides to cut the training budget while increasing the bonus (incentive) money. Again, the results are cyclical: The lack of training yields the inability to perform. The lack of performance is soon reflected in decreased sales or low productivity despite the “carrot” of monetary incentives, and, too often, management determines – incorrectly – that the incentive isn’t enough and raises the “stakes.”

The greater irony of this flawed philosophy is that it worked reasonably well in years past when management was guided by the Division of Labor principle. Most complex jobs were subdivided into many separate, relatively simple tasks. The average person on a production line could learn to “put a wheel on the axle” quickly with little training. If an employee quit or was fired, replacement workers were easy to hire and “train.” In this scenario, most performance problems were, in fact, the result of poor motivation; hence, low training budgets and large monetary incentives became standard practice.

Today, however, there has been a profound reversal in the relationship between training and motivation. For today’s employees to become productive, there is normally a significant training investment required, typically funded in one of two ways. First, the cost is borne by the employee in technical schools in the form of tuition, books, and hands-on training. These trained employees can command higher salaries because they bring significant skills with them to the organization. Second, the employer can hire untrained people, and then pay for their salary, benefits, classes, instructor’s travel, facility, materials, and practice time. The sum total of direct and indirect training costs can be staggering! If the company is in a highly competitive market, they may not be able to pass the training costs on to the customer; it comes off the bottom line. The sad

news is that if these employees quit, they take all of those expensive skills with them when they leave. If that's not enough of a "downer," these ex-employees may seek employment in competing company – or even start one of their own. The competing company visualizes the words "great hire" as the applicant comes to work. All they have to teach the new employee (figuratively speaking) is where the restrooms and coffeepot are located, and they soon become productive. In a word, the "losing" company is financing the employee training programs of their competitors. Does this mean companies with high turnover would do well to stop wasting bottom-line dollars on training? Certainly not!

When I am called to visit the "losing" company because they are having retention problems, I hear, "We have such high personnel turnover, there's no point in spending money on training." Or, "We don't want to spend too much money on training because they will be able to leave us for a better paying job."

This mind set is the result of crisis management and panic. The organization is hemorrhaging its talent; the only tourniquet is effective training of both employees and supervisors/managers. The training will provide the skills; the skills create motivation to produce good products/services, which the customer will buy so the company can stay in business – one more day! Remember, only trained employees can be motivated, which includes being motivated to stay. Also, remember that incentives (motivation) for skilled workers needn't always be monetary (although this helps and is possible since improved performance improves sales). Productivity incentives can also include such things as promotions, additional benefits, flex time, and other "perks" worthy of top employees.

In conclusion, when you study successful, "winning" organizations, they share some common values. They provide excellent training for their workers and supervisors/managers. The training creates motivation and loyalty – yes, loyalty! And retention is the outcome of high performance, great morale, enthusiastic customers, and loyalty.

It is projected that 60 percent of the future jobs will require training that only 20 percent of the present workers possess (Hudson Institute). Making sure your employees are in the 20 percent could save you from joining the statistics of failed companies.