

October 28, 2007  
Demotivating your workforce

Do you remember how excited you were to start your first day of a new school year? New shoes, new pad and pencil (iPod and cell phone in today's world), friends from last year, a new teacher and new classroom. Pretty cool. Do you remember how long the excitement lasted? Lunchtime for me, in a good year.

So what happened?

Same old, same old. "Class, I'm Mrs. Snyder and here are your assigned seats. Here are your assignments for the next 8 months, here are the rules for going to the bathroom, there is no talking unless you raise your hand to ask a question and you will be given a detention if you don't follow the rules. I want you all to have a good year".

Right. I could hardly wait. Talk about being demotivated. I left the summer with my friends, playing baseball, swimming, riding my bike, staying up late at night for this? I don't think so. And to prove it, I would do everything in my power to make Mrs. Snyders's life miserable. That was me, always the contrarian.

Fast forward eighteen years or so to the first day of your first job after high school or college.

New clothes, new calculator and pen, new coworkers to meet, a new boss and new office. Pretty cool. Do you remember how long the excitement lasted? Lunchtime for me, in a good year.

So what happened?

Same old, same old. “Frank I’m Harry and here is your office. We start work at 8 and leave at 5. You can take a half hour for lunch while the cafeteria is opened between 12 to 1:30. You get one week of vacation after six months on the job and of course, you have Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year’s Day off. Since it’s the end of August you also get Labor Day off but you don’t get paid for it because you haven’t worked for two months yet. Here is the employee manual and when you’re done reading it please read all 33 volumes of our SOPs so you can learn how we do business. Welcome aboard and let me know if you have any questions”.

Yeah, I have a question. Can I resign now?

Companies today are much more sophisticated and don’t act like this anymore, do they? Of course not. They create departments and hire consultants to motivate their employees, ensuring the success of both the company and its workers. In all seriousness, many companies do recognize the importance of meaningful onboarding, recognition programs, incentives and quality of life for their employees. In a recent study (<http://hrdailyadvisor.blr.com/archive/category/1003.aspx>) David Sirota, Louis A. Mischkind, and Michael Irwin Meltzer found that although the great majority of employees are quite enthusiastic when they start a new job, in about 85 percent of companies, employees’ morale sharply declines after their first six months - and continues to deteriorate for years afterward. They recommend that companies can avoid demotivating their employees by creating an atmosphere of pride and recognition, redefining the manager’s role as expeditors and building strong teams.

This is great advice and when practiced throughout the organization it can lead to success. Google, Genentech, Capital One, and Wegman’s are leaders in these practices and are, not incidentally, amongst the best companies in their sectors. They are not endowed with rich employees but instead have developed a culture that enriches their employees, resulting in superior results. Their philosophies are the same: keep the employees satisfied and they will make us successful. They recognize that workers will be spending copious amounts of time, well, working, and they need to make that time meaningful. So when a worker returns from vacation, he or she will be excited to get back to work, and not dreading the intervals between work and lunch and lunch and 5 o’clock. Or having to ask Mrs. Snyder’s permission to use the bathroom.