

Minor management irritations do more to undermine innovation and motivation than any other force in the American workplace

Supermotivating the Workforce: People Want to Do More but Work ‘Systems’ Get in the Way

By
Brian McDermott

It doesn't take a Ph.D. in industrial psychology to figure out the fate of many companies could be altered for the better if workers were more motivated. Too often, however, the knee-jerk reaction when things go wrong is to blame the workers for their poor attitudes and lack of work ethic. **Dean Spitzer**, author of *SuperMotivation: A Blueprint for Energizing Your Organization from Top to Bottom* (Amacon 1995), says look within your business systems for the true causes for low motivation — and for their remedies.

Demotivators — performance inhibitors built into the way most of us do business — do more to undermine motivation in the American workplace than any other force, Spitzer says. “They can cause workers to reduce, consciously or unconsciously, the amount of productive energy they use in their jobs.”

Demotivating influences are prevalent in most organizations, he says.

And, despite the profound impact they have on performance, they are often ignored, usually because they creep into an organization and become part of the normal operations.

“It’s no secret that fear and anger, both expressed and repressed, are rampant in organizations today, and demotivators are responsible for much of this. Employees are increasingly venting their emotions in the form of negative behavior, such as criticizing management, withholding effort, sabotaging the work of others.” And demotivators adversely affect the health of workers. Research indicates that work-related ailments — in no small part due to the prevalence of demotivators — account for 100,000 deaths and 340,000 disabilities and cost American industry \$150 billion each year. (See *A Great Place to Work*, Random House, 1988, by R. Levering.)

Two other sobering thoughts that may explain why organizations suffer with uninspired performance:

■ 84% of workers say they could perform better if they wanted to, according to a survey cited in *Managing the Equity Factor* (Houghton Mifflin, 1989), by R.C. Huseman and J.D. Hatfield).

■ 50% of workers said they put forth only enough effort to hang onto their jobs, according to research presented by L.H. Chusmir in *Thank God It's Monday* (New American Library).

“Too many managers underestimate the importance of what they consider minor irritations, not realizing how large these irritations loom in the subjective experience of employees. To employees stuck in the middle, these demotivators are not minor at all,” Spitzer says.

Most-Troubling Demotivators

What are the demotivators troubling the American workforce? Once you start looking you'll probably identify many unique to your organization, but Spitzer's research identifies 21. Here are six that top the list (and relate to positive employee practices), along with some of Spitzer's suggestions about how to eliminate them:

(1) Politics. Surprised? Not likely. The informal struggles for power, influence, resources, favors, and promotions, which are guided by “unwritten rules,” send ambiguous and anxiety-producing messages. Spitzer says, “Although political savvy may be perceived as important by some employees, ‘politicking’ is viewed with derision by most employees, who perceive it to be a wasteful management game that

almost always affects them negatively.”

Suggestion: Reduce politics by eliminating the unwritten rules for granting rewards, promotions, and resources. Make decisions in the open and based on clear objective criteria. Also clear up past political transgressions with open discussion about plans for change.

(2) Unclear Expectations.

“Without realizing it, management often sends a bewildering array of mixed messages that confuse, rather than guide, employees. After a while, workers realize that when everything is a priority, nothing is a priority. Employees also figure out that management is confused about what it really wants. Furthermore, many organizations tell employees

“Organizations can become locked into activities and procedures that are perpetuated long after they have become obsolete.” Tasks become cluttered with unnecessary steps, excessive paperwork, waste, duplication, and bureaucracy, and work that should take minutes ends up taking hours.

Suggestion: Regularly reassess tasks for efficiency and effectiveness and eliminate what's not needed.

Remember, however, “reengineering” — technical work redesign — does not in itself address many of the human issues that lead to successful change.

(4) Hypocrisy. “Hypocrisy is a behavioral form of dishonesty, usually involving lofty comments or promises followed by contradictory

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to do one thing and then reward another.”

Suggestion: When managers probe, most are shocked to discover how little is really understood in the ranks about organizational priorities. Review expectations for consistency. Ask employees regularly about their understanding of priorities and expectations. The goal must be to reduce the mixed messages.

(3) Poorly Designed Work. Work often expands over time to beyond what is needed or productive.

behaviors. For example, how many times have you heard: ‘Thanks for your feedback’ (but your input was never acted upon); ‘We value you’ (but there was no tangible display of value); ‘We trust you’ (but you'd better ask permission before you do anything); ‘We are 100% committed to quality’ (but get the product out on time, or else). Many organizations talk a good game, saying one thing but doing another.”

Suggestion: Monitor the consistency between words and action. Avoid using exaggerated claims and slogans. Walk the talk. Be sensitive to

21 Workplace Demotivators that Breed Fear and Anger

Are these factors at play in your organization? If so, you've got a problem, says the author of *SuperMotivation: A Blueprint for Energizing Your Organization from Top to Bottom*:

Politics

Unclear Expectations

Unnecessary Rules

Poorly Designed Work

Unproductive Meetings

Lack of Follow-up

Constant Change

Internal Competition

Dishonesty

Hypocrisy

Withholding Information

Unfairness

Discouraging Responses

Criticism

Capacity Underutilization

Tolerating Poor Performance

Being Taken for Granted

Management Invisibility

Overcontrol

Takeaways

Being Forced to Do Poor-

Quality Work

the impression management makes by its behaviors.

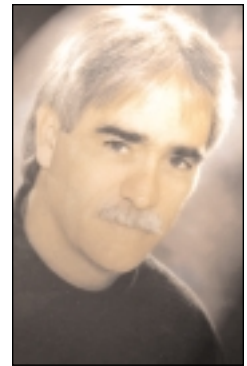
(5) Being Take for Granted. “Most workers receive little or no positive feedback or recognition, and, sadly, most supervisors and managers are genuinely unaware of how little personal attention they give employees.” Numerous surveys show the disparity between how workers and managers perceive the amount of recognition doled out in organizations. Managers generally feel more generous than they are perceived to be by others.

Suggestion: Little things can make a big difference. Respond promptly and constructively to employee concerns. Show you care.

(6) Being Forced to Do Poor-Quality Work. “Most workers want to feel good about the quality of their work. But some organizations make decisions and design systems that rob employees of their right to pride in workmanship, a prerogative that the late quality guru W. Edwards Deming considered one of the keys to motivation in the workplace.

“Time and cost constraints are two major reasons for quality compromises. Organizations often decide that they must sacrifice quality in order to meet short-term production goals.”

Suggestion: Don't blame poor quality on the workforce; solve underlying problems by asking people what it is about your systems that keep them from achieving high performance standards. Think long term. If there is a quality problem, “stop the production line” immediately to send a clear message about what's important.



Brian McDermott is senior consultant and chief storyteller with GrowthWorks Inc., a training and consulting company in Minneapolis.
■ 800.832-5385
■ bmcdermott@growthworksinc.com