

Intrinsic Motivation – Using the Right Tactics

Board Room Magazine July/August 2017

Trina was an exceptional assistant manager. She was a salaried staff person who worked more than her scheduled hours, she came in early and left late; she was personable with both members and staff. She showed drive and desire, tempered by immense empathy. Chris wanted to show appreciation and help her out. “Trina, you are by far the best assistant manager with whom I’ve had the pleasure of working. I know that your salary is adequate and I’d like to help you get a bit more. You’ve done a great job in “selling” our club events, and even though our catering manager has that responsibility, I’d like to give you a commission on those events in which you participate. Say one percent of the total sales. At the end of each month, just give me a listing of the events and the total revenue and I’ll put you in for one percent. What do you think?” Trina, ever a smile on her face, nodded approvingly and thanked Chris. But, Chris noticed something not exactly as right, there was not the positive exuberance that was expected.

Trina is what is referred to as *intrinsically motivated*. She does the job because it is inherently interesting and enjoyable for her; it supports her innate need to feel competent, autonomous, and related. According to motivation expert Ed Deci, PhD at the University of Rochester, there is a continuum of normal motivational tendencies which ranges from those lacking motivation (amotivated), to those requiring external prompts (extrinsically motivated), to those who are motivated by the inherent satisfaction of the behavior itself (intrinsically motivated). So, why do we want people who are intrinsically motivated? We want both, but those who are intrinsically motivated will perform with higher creativity, be highly engaged, have a positive emotional outlook, and work longer as compared to those extrinsically motivated. In other words – they are the Trinas that we all look to cultivate.

In the weeks and months that followed, Chris noticed a diminished drive in Trina. She was as good with the staff and members as ever, but just not as energized. Her month end reports tended to be turned in late, if at all. Chris was mystified.

What happened to Chris was a mismatch of appropriate tactics. While Chris wanted to help Trina feel even better about her job, giving her an “incentive” had proven to be detrimental to her intrinsic motivation. Volumes of research confirm that virtually every type of expected tangible reward made contingent on task performance undermines intrinsic motivation, because they are deemed as “controllers.” It is theorized that intrinsic motivation is inherent in humans – we want and enjoy being intrinsically motivated. In order to keep Trina in her “zone,” Chris needed only to ask her to perform optimally challenging duties, follow up with positive and open feedback, and refrain from demeaning evaluations. Critical to the success of intrinsically motivated people are the senses that the person is both competent and autonomous. Taking away the responsibility of choice (and consequence) from a highly competent person will reduce or eliminate the

intrinsic motivation that is naturally desired. Intrinsically motivated people thrive on positive feedback, the self-perception of competence, the feeling of autonomy, and being part of the team.

Chris could have saved the one percent and given Trina the appropriate boost that Chris was attempting by simply telling her what a great job she was doing, how well she was progressing, and that she was an outstanding team leader. Chris could have thrown in dinner for two, but only as a gift and not a contingency on work – gifts are good!

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