

Motivating Teams in Changing Times: Capitalize on strengths and good humor

Written by Julie Desmond

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As Americans start spending money again, companies are stepping up production. The good news: more people are getting hired. The other news: more people have to adjust to new co-workers and new initiatives. Great leaders recognize the value – and the challenge - of building cohesive teams. Motivating groups of people from disparate backgrounds, whose trust banks might be limited, is possible if leaders seek out strengths, keep communication channels flowing and recognize that even serious situations can sometimes be handled lightly.

Leader Jake is sweating over a team that never wins. He hopes to teach and develop the group by identifying weaknesses and helping players overcome deficiencies. He leaves work every day exhausted and frustrated; his employees have learned, all right, that they're inept, incapable of ever doing anything well.

Leader Frank started out with a losing team, too. His group came from different industries and many had been out of work altogether for some time. Realizing he couldn't make a quarterback into a ballerina, but needing both, he spent time getting to know his players. He strived to learn their strengths and interests. Armed with knowledge about the talent on his roster, he assigned tasks and set goals according to what people did best. Progress happened quickly for Frank's team because people were confident in their ability to make decisions, advise others and get the job done.

Clear and appropriate goals are always a good idea. Interestingly, some managers share the company's long term objectives on only a need-to-know basis. Great leaders realize that if a company is going to succeed, all employees need-to-know how to define success. Who plays basketball without a hoop?

And who plays basketball alone? Shooting hoops is fine; shooting hoops with others makes it a game. Managers who maximize on two-way communication can identify and respond to issues more quickly than those who communicate only from the top down. Listening to an underling's ideas does not diminish a leader's authority. Allowing some back and forth brainstorming, managers can learn from employees and employees quickly realize their contributions have impact.

Scotch Guard was invented at 3M when someone spilled chemicals on the inventor's shoe. When things do go wrong, which they will, the leader who keeps his perspective can maintain control and composure. What is really at stake? Is there a silver lining somewhere in this storm? After patenting his mistake, it's likely the 3Mer had plenty of funds available to go buy

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another pair.

Surgeons, fire fighters, police, bridge builders... Some teams make decisions that truly have life or death implications. Yet, surgeons are some of the funniest people out there. Use levity, entertainment and interesting conversation to get your point across on the job. If you don't have a sense of humor, cultivate one. One manager I worked for honed effective communications skills during open-mike nights at an improv bar.

As companies change, teams will constantly change, too. Successful leaders are those who can drive results by capitalizing on strengths and contributions of the team they have.

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