Motivation Misfires

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I'm passionate about creating work environments that truly enable and support your success. Feel free to call or email me for a complimentary mini consultation to explore potential opportunities to increase your capacity and support the success of your agile initiative. Just tell me what you think the issue is, and we'll start from there.

The zeroth step in boosting motivation is to stop doing things that demotivate people.

Many managers ask me, "How can I motivate my team?"

I've certainly seen many efforts to motivate teams. Contests, prizes, pep talks, badges, points, canned thank you notes, and recognition events. Most of this comes down to using rewards to motivate people to continue certain behavior. Some of these work for some people, some of the time. But most of them backfire, for most people, most of the time.

Consider these attempts at motivating:

1. A team lead receives a substantial sum of money when the team meets a critical deadline. Despite pleas from the team lead, management will not divide the money equally between all team members.

2. A developer worked late into the evening to fix a critical bug. His manager, wanting to motivate others to show similar dedication, gave the developer a ticket to the opening night of a big movie. One ticket—another night away from his wife and kids.

3. A programmer discovered and fixed an error that was costing the company millions. He worked with an account rep to provide data that allowed the company to recover a substantial portion of the money from erroneous invoices. The VP of the division gave the programmer a gift certificate for $100 at a local restaurant.

4. A manager singled out one person from a team for public recognition, and didn't mention the contributions of any other team members.

5. A VP called a special meeting. When all the developers were assembled. He opened his brief case, which was full of cash.

Every programmer received $300 cash money. When they got paid the next Friday, they found that the award was taxed, and taxed at a higher rate then their normal salary. Actual pay was $100 less than than they usually received.

Each of these attempts at motivation backfired. Many people know that rewards and other extrinsic motivators aren't effective. In fact, they often diminish intrinsic motivation. And making one person the winner makes other people losers.

Why do managers do such things? Some managers still assume that "workers" won't work without carrots (or sticks). It doesn't occur to them that carrots might not be the preferred diet.

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Some managers don't understand what motivates people doing technical work. Just look at the surveys that report what managers believe are the key motivators for developers, and what developers report motivates them. Major mismatch.

Some managers see themselves as different from "workers." For example, they often believe that money is the primary motivator for "workers," but they don't ascribe such crass motive to themselves. Just like they don't need carrots and sticks, but "workers" do.

Some managers can't imagine that "workers" wouldn't welcome some sign of management favor and approval. This is about power and status, pure and simple.

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