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Managers Need to be Less Controlling

Singapore Management University

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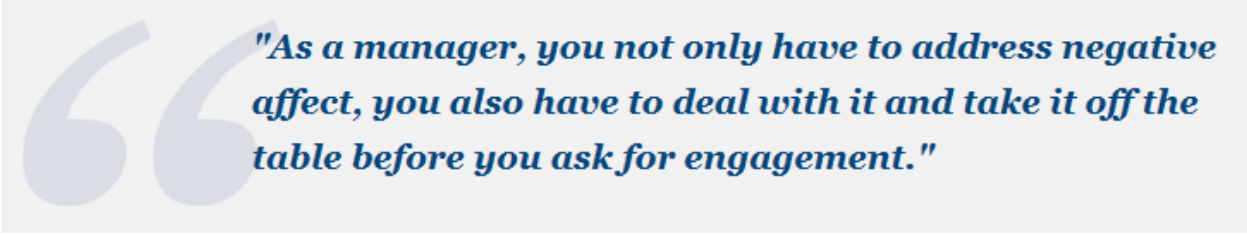
Being so can motivate employees better than material incentives

Managers are mostly concerned with accomplishing short-term organisational objectives such as meeting monthly sales targets, hitting factory production quotas and drawing up shift rosters. This is especially true of middle managers. Because of the pressing and immediate nature of these goals, managers may try to motivate employees to achieve them within a specific time frame through incentives, directives and compliance requests.

However, these motivational mechanisms are "manufactured contingencies…that are separate from or are arbitrarily related to the activity" that employees are hired to do, says Korea University's Johnmarshall Reeve. He describes such mechanisms as a "controlling motivating style", which pressures employees to behave in a specific and manager-directed way.

"If you watch a manager day after day, month after month, what you'll see is a fairly consistent style," says Reeve, who was recently at Singapore Management University (SMU) to speak at the SMU Social Science and Humanities Seminar, An Intervention-Based Program of Research on Teachers' Motivating Styles. "Even after many appraisals and training, if they are controlling now, they'll be controlling the next year."

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"It's not something they can change on their own – they need external evidence-based advice.

It's not about changing one or two or three things because it's developmental. The manager needs to change, grow and then change some more. And from there, a manager could become genuinely autonomy-supportive."

The autonomy-supportive manager

An autonomy-supportive motivating style, Reeve tells Perspectives@SMU, is one that nurtures employees' inner motivational resources: interest in the job, a sense of value in their work and a perceived competence in their duties.

Other than nurturing inner motivational resources, Reeve also identified three kinds of behaviours typical of autonomy-supportive managers:

•Use non-controlling language. Communicating workplace requirements and performance feedback through messages that are informational and flexible, rather than through rigid, evaluative and pressurising ones. For instance, "I've noticed your work has slipped lately. Would you like to talk about what the problem might be?" instead of "You should work harder";

•Provide rationales for requests. Explain the 'why' instead of saying "because I said so";

•Acknowledge and accept expressions of negative effect. Listen to employees' complaints and disagreements and accept those sentiments as a potentially valid reaction to being asked to do something difficult or unappealing.

"As a manager, you not only have to address negative effect, you also have to deal with it and take it off the table before you ask for engagement," Reeve explains. "If the employee is resentful or frustrated or angry, he or she won't be a good worker. The manager needs to see where the anger is coming from and ask if there's anything he can do to help."

Reeve adds: "The employee often knows what the problem is and even how to solve it. But they typically need the manager's understanding and assistance in changing the situation for the better. Once the adjustment has been made, and if the frustration is gone, then the manager can get on with solving the problem. That's what a manager does – setting up an employee so he or she can do her job well."

Findings from the field

In 2008, as part of his research for his Autonomy-Supportive Intervention Programme, Reeve conducted a study at a Fortune 500 company. The results suggest that managers' motivating styles towards employees are malleable, and that highly experienced managers were especially able to expand their entrenched style to incorporate autonomy-supportive behaviours. Still, they needed some convincing.

"They were skeptical at first," Reeve recalls. "That's why the first thing I put across to them was, 'The last thing I want to do or imply I would do is that I want to change your managerial style. What we want to do is expand it, to add elements of autonomy support that aren't there.'"

"So we told the managers, 'Here's what we saw on the floor, and here's how you can approach it.' We're not asking them to change anything, we're just trying to supplement and build on their style. They were open to that."

Still, there was little evidence that these managers made the ultimate leap to building and enhancing employees' inner motivational resources. Reeve wrote in his research: "Having been most concerned with their most salient, performance-relevant problems, managers apparently did not work as actively or consistently on the next-level goal of enhancing employees' inner motivational resources to enhance autonomous motivation."

Why? Are middle managers simply too pressed by deadlines to think about such things? Would it make a difference if senior management completely bought into the idea of an autonomy-supportive environment?

"It's like being in a school, where the principal and parents are pushing, and they want to be able to control you – you're just a conduit," Reeve says. "They just want you to make a certain number of phone calls, or produce a certain number of units of a product. In such a situation, it's just not going be an autonomy-supportive organisation."

How then does one convince senior management to take the plunge?

Reeve says: "If another company adopts it, it works, and that company gets an advantage by employees being more productive, or if the attrition rate drops. Upper management will say, 'Whatever they are doing right, we're going to copy it.'"