



Hands-on Management

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"Psychic Income" from a Job Well Done

Have you ever noticed that young people in today's workplace tend to operate from what I'll call a mismatched frame of reference concerning what's meaningful in life? In my opinion, the greatest difference between "them" and "me"—besides the fact that they're young and I'm old—can be reduced to the mental distance separating our perceived realities of work and leisure. Let me explain.

When I Was Your Age . . .

It seems to be much more difficult today to sell the younger generation on the concept that work is its own reward. *Why, in my day, the five-mile walk to school, up hill both ways, barefoot in snow up to your ...* Wait a minute—I took the school bus as a kid and just last Friday afternoon, I couldn't wait for the weekend to start. Okay, now that I've refreshed my memory, maybe we're not that different after all. We might look at things from a different perspective, but it's important that we not lose sight of the fact that, unless one of us gets rich quick, it's not easy to separate work from the rest of our lives. Self-examination to gain understanding into the reasons why we work can also give insight into the attitudes of those around us.

Did you know that employee retention is in the top five on a list of concerns expressed by surface finishing management? Retaining a skilled workforce is not a new problem, however. From the time of the pharaohs, there is proof of this point. It doesn't take a rocket scientist, for example, to translate some of the hieroglyphics on the walls of the Egyptian tombs. You know the ones,

with row after row of pyramid slaves in the classic "walk like an Egyptian" pose. The hieroglyphics from the tomb of King Tut "Uncommon" are even more obvious—those slaves have their thumbs a lot closer to their noses! I guess what I'm trying to say is that, as far back in time as you want to go, "work has always been introspectively evaluated, often negatively."¹

Formal psychological and sociological analysis of work began about the same time as the modern Industrial Revolution. Henry Ford introduced America to the first standardized economical automobile. To accomplish this, he had to design uniform parts that would be mass-produced to a repeatable tolerance on what he called an "assembly line." Before the invention of the assembly line, the same craftsman who constructed the engine of an automobile would also end up making and installing the seats. Workers literally hand-built the car from the ground up. What a sense of satisfaction there must have been in watching the car you put together drive away many weeks after the day you started the process. All this changed with the introduction of Ford's assembly line. Sure, the cars were produced faster, but individual pride was lacking.

Work attitudes can directly affect the quality of the product as well. You might remember that long-ago saying from Detroit: "Don't buy a car made on Monday morning or Friday afternoon or you'll be getting a lemon!" It must have been very defeating for management to watch workmanship decline, unstoppable, to the end of the line because at the time, the accepted theory was "build first, then fix the problem later."

Early on, in an attempt to improve life on the assembly line, engineers would add new tasks to old ones. Their rationale was: "Workers must be getting tired of just tightening this nut, so we'll add panel alignment. They've got to like their job now, right?" This is what is known as job *enlargement*. Much to management's chagrin, however, it does not necessarily improve worker attitudes.

When General Motors first introduced its Saturn®, the car was highly promoted through television commercials featuring people who worked on the assembly line. Quality control was considered a "hot button," and one of the commercials showed a young woman who "pushes" that hot button by stopping the line because of a potential problem. When the line stops, everyone looks up and stares at her. There is a dramatic pause, during which she seems to be wondering if she did the right thing. Cut to cheers and smiles everywhere—yes, we have done it right again! Fade to a shot of the finished (quality) car. End commercial. This is known as job *enrichment*. Management changed the workers' attitudes by investing time and energy in the person, as well as the product.

All we have to do, then, is maintain a positive attitude—in spite of OSHA, taxes, paperwork, employees, employee retention, customers, customer retention ... *Is It Too Late to Run Away and Join the Circus?* This just happens to be the title of a book by Dr. Marti Smye, as well as the inspiration for this column. Her book examines why we work for the "40-somethings and 50-somethings who are re-thinking how they want to spend the rest of their lives. Included

are a number of very good exercises that provoke thought and are realistic in the application of the results and conclusions that are drawn.”³

Why Work?

For most of us, the major reason we work is an economic one: for the “money and benefits—especially health insurance.”¹ There are other reasons, such as great surroundings, status (you *are* involved with surface finishing, after all) and caring, loving associates. For many of us, there is also the sense of accomplishment and the inner rewards that result from a job well done. *Psychic income* is the term used to describe the many forms this “feel good” stuff can take.

Last but not least, the frosting on the attitude cake is ... variety! “You thrive and perform better if variety exists in what you are asked to do. (But, you accept that others prefer routine and always want to know what to expect.)”¹ We need to realize that everyone will benefit tremendously from a (slightly) changing work environment.

One way the AESF can help add variety and build self-esteem in workers and management is through the Society’s extensive training and educational services. Check out page ?? for a sampling of some of the courses that will be offered in the upcoming months. There are also home study programs and interactive CD-ROM courses, all available through the AESF. If you don’t have a current catalog, just call the AESF Bookstore at 800/334-2052 to request one.

So, are my peers and I that much different from our younger counterparts? Probably not. One of the most important lessons we must all learn in life is that, for the most part, people are pretty much the same and will respond to their surroundings—and their coworkers—in a likewise manner. Just apply the Golden Rule—it can move mountains. *P&SF*

References

1. Joyce Lain Kennedy, “Careers Today,” *Buck County Courier Times*, July 15, 1999.

2. Marti Diane Smye, *Is It Too Late to Run Away and Join the Circus? Finding the Life You Really Want*, Richard Chagnon, Macmillan, 1998.
3. Amazon.com customer comments (a reader from Washington, D.C.), December 10, 1998.

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