

## Motivation Means More Than a Ham

This is a story about a man and his ham. Actually, it is a story about how we make honest but horribly misguided attempts to motivate others. At its heart, effective rewards are provided contingent on performance, are of value to the recipients and (at least sometimes) the process is owned by employees, not just the “boss.”

Case in point, I once met a CEO of a medium sized business. One of the areas I was examining for him was his approach to employee rewards and recognition. I knew I was in trouble when he began the conversation by telling me that he did not understand why he needed to spend so much time thinking about how to motivate others. The conversation went something like this.

“When I was starting out, I didn’t receive any training. I just figured things out. We didn’t have any goofy awards either.”

I said, “Good for you. You’re very smart and have strong self-motivation.”

“That’s right, and I didn’t need someone telling me I could do it either,” he added.

“Correct. They were lucky to have you. I’m the same way. I like to jump in and just figure things out. The challenge is fun, right?” I asked.

“You bet, but people today – especially the young ones – lack motivation,” he replied.

“That’s why we’re having this chat. The question is how normal do you think you are?” I had him at this point. I knew that because he was not normal and because he had a big ego, he would admit to being out of the ordinary.

“I guess guys like me aren’t that common,” he finally managed.

*Got him!*

“No, you’re not, and unless you think you can always hire extremely bright, self-motivated people, we have to talk about what it means to be more supportive. Now let’s talk about that ham.”

Up until this point, the company’s main approach to employee motivation was a prize given out at the quarterly employee meeting. A ham. The boss liked ham and thus he assumed everyone else would to. He assumed they would see it as a genuine token of his appreciation for all of their hard work. He was wrong. The ham was the laughing stock of the company.

Unfortunately, the CEO was oblivious to this fact. Each quarter he dutifully stood before the troops, announced the winner and smiled as he handed over the hams. The employees worked diligently to hide their disgruntled smirks and giggles. More than a few hams had been tossed in the dumpster in the back of the building. The employees

knew the winners were merely the “favorites” of certain managers. Thus, not only was the event not “fair,” but not everyone wants a ham.

I had to break him the news. I took him out back to see the hams in the dumpster. Initially, he was seriously angry. After a few minutes he began to mellow. I explained that even if the ham was an honest gesture of appreciation and even if he personally loved ham, those things had little to do with whether the reward would be motivational.

I advised him to call a company-wide meeting in the parking lot, announce that his motivational scheme was not working and then declare that it would be stopped and replaced by an employee designed program. I then suggested he should toss a ham off the roof and let it splatter in the parking lot to really drive home the point. He looked at me as if I were insane.

After speaking with a few other executives, he realized that my assessment of the ham debacle was accurate. He called the meeting and made sure not to tell anyone what it was about. Everyone assembled outside in the parking lot at the designative time. The CEO emerged on the roof of the four story building, ham in hand. He said the reward program was not working, that it was his fault, that he would no longer force unwanted hams on the employees and that henceforth the employees would be in charge of the quarterly employee reward program. Then he tossed the ham into the parking lot. It made a big mess. Everyone laughed and got the point. Their view of him did not change radically in an instant, but it clearly moved in the right direction.

A cross sectional team of employees was created and deliberated for two weeks as to how the program could be improved. They asked for my input and listened to about half of it. They worked hard to find a way to make sure that the award was given to the most deserving person, not some “favorite.” They came up with many low-cost interesting rewards such that employees would have a choice.

The resulting reward program was clearly superior to the old one. It offered more tailored and personalized rewards, the process of selection was more wide spread and democratic and the process was mostly owned by the employees. In truth, the new system was nearly as flawed as the old one, operationally speaking. Morale, however, got better. That is the power of giving employees a voice in processes that affect them.

The CEO in this case spent less time on the program and had better results because he realized that rewards must be contingent on performance, of value to the recipients and maybe even “owned” by the employees. To this day they still talk about the “ham incident.”

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