

CITIZEN-TIMES.com

To motivate employees, you must understand how they view their work

By Ed Brenegar

Real Life Leadership

November 5, 2007 12:15 am

Question: Your recent column on passion got me thinking about my employees. None of them have any passion for their work. I have to stay on them to make sure projects get done on time. I try to motivate them to work harder, but they tell me this job is not their life. What do I do?

Answer: It is important that you understand what your employees are telling you. When they say that this job is not their life, they aren't saying they don't like their work.

They're saying that what matters most to them is not work but some other activity or relationship. Work is how they fund the things they really love.

As the business owner, your passion is your business. Your identity and sense of purpose is wrapped up in your work. You own the business and the business owns your passion. As a result, there's a basic difference in how you and your employees approach your work.

Trying to motivate employees to work harder to meet goals makes sense from the owner's perspective, but your employees may not see it that way. Attempts to motivate them can just add stress to their lives.

Operating a business isn't just managing the tasks and processes of work, and it's more than a simple economic exchange of work for pay. Managing a workplace is also about managing relationships.

Although most relationships at work are not equal, there must be mutual respect.

If you want greater commitment from your employees, you'll need to appeal to them on a level other than what's best for your business. Their only stake is a paycheck, and your only real threat is loss of employment. You don't want your relationship with your employees to be based on threats. It poisons the work environment.

Consider how you can champion your workers' passions outside of work. Include a day off for passion each year. Sponsor the youth league where an employee is a coach. Make a matching contribution to an employee's favorite nonprofit. Use the company newsletter to celebrate employee accomplishments outside of work.

Sometimes employees resist working harder because they think they're not appreciated.

I'm not suggesting praising people who don't deserve it, but supervisors must learn to show real respect and affirmation.

When your expression is genuine, your employees will know it — and they'll work harder.

This is the opinion of Ed Brenegar. He is president of the Community of Leadership, a leadership development and transition-planning consultancy. He writes the Leading Questions blog at <http://edbrenegar.typepad.com>. Send your leadership questions to him at ed@edbrenegar.com.

Copyright 2007 Asheville Citizen-Times. All rights reserved.