



“Quest for Employee Engagement Part Two: The Power of Positive Reinforcement.”

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In Part 1 of this story, I explained the three kinds of employees you have. When it comes to engagement, every company has just three kinds of workers: *Non-Compliant*, *Compliant*, and *Committed*.

Non-Compliant: “I will not follow your safety and quality rules; because I am convinced the only way to get high production is to take risks and shortcuts.”

Compliant: “I will follow your safety and quality procedures, as long as someone (a manager, a supervisor, or a peer observer) is standing there watching me. But when that person leaves, I’ll take more risks and shortcuts.”

*Committed: “I will follow the safety and quality procedures **in the moment of choice, when nobody is watching. This is who I am....”***

According to Gallup and Towers Perrin, if you’re like most companies, less than 10% of your employees are at the commitment level, 80% are at compliance, and 10% are non-compliant.

Oh, yeah, one more thing...the single biggest driver of your company profits happens to be the engagement, the commitment of your team. And many firms charted a 25% drop in their commitment/engagement scores over the last few years.

Why do you think that is?

To get commitment requires something that is rarely delivered by today's managers and leaders: Positive Reinforcement.

When I speak about Positive Reinforcement, I am *not* talking about steak dinners and handing out giftcards and t-shirts for lagging indicators, or other "one size fits all" approaches.

That's not positive reinforcement for the behaviors you truly want more of. In fact, those types of reinforcement actually erode commitment and encourage non-compliance. In short, they breed mediocrity.

These "one-size-fits-all" systems reward all employees with the same thing: cash payouts, gift cards, steak dinners, t-shirts or all of the above.

They are the most common kinds of reward systems because they are easy, and often inexpensive to deliver. Google made the classic beginner's mistake by using a "one size fits all" reward system where every employee received a 10% pay raise regardless of their performance or lack thereof.

Most companies (whether they use Behavior Based Safety systems or not) have some kind of safety "celebration" where once again, everybody gets the same steak dinner or t-shirt regardless of their contributions to performance. Often these systems are in contradiction and at odds with the stated philosophies of management. You have to put your money where your mouth is.

When we reward everyone the same, regardless of their level of effort, we are introducing a system very similar to communism. On paper, communism sounds like a great idea. Here's the gist of how it works: It doesn't matter how hard we all work, we're all going to get the same thing, and we'll look out for each other. Sadly, like so many others, that form of government hasn't worked out too well for those who've tried it. But, hey, A for effort. And I think the same underlying flaws in this system are found in today's "one size fits all" systems.

To prove my point, let's pretend that you and I work together.

Pretend too please, for a moment that you are the hardest working employee in the department (e.g. you are *committed to safety and quality in the moment of choice when nobody is watching*) and pretend that I am your co-worker, old "get 'er done" Bill Sims.

We both know that I cut corners and take shortcuts that jeopardize safety and quality, and I even tease you for doing things the "hard way" as I watch you putting safety first.

As we both go through the steak dinner line at the million safe work hour celebration, I grin at you and say, "Hey, look here, my steak's bigger than yours....*how does that make you feel?*"

How do you feel, now, exactly? A little mad? You better believe it. The more you think about it, the madder you get. And pretty soon you start to say to yourself, "I guess nobody really cares what I do around here....you wind up getting the same thing no matter how good a job you do."

And very slowly, bit by bit, like the hands moving on that old clock on your mantle, your commitment begins to unwind, to erode.

Before long you aren't one of those 10% "above and beyond" employees who are committed. Welcome to Club Compliance. You can hang out here with the rest of us, the 80% of our workers who have figured out how to do just enough to get by, but not a whole lot more.

Why should they? Management hasn't given them a clear and compelling reason to care. Management has made it clear they will reward poor performers and non-compliance just as much as they will the high achievers. So, through their "one-size-fits-all" approaches, they have rewarded incompetence, and punished high achievement.

How dumb is that?

This phenomenon even has a special name in the military. It's called "eating cheese". Think of the cheese as the collective passion, spirit, morale and commitment of your team. Think of the dozens of mice hiding in the shadows drooling over that big block of cheese as your employees. When the cat (leadership) is around the mice keep their distance from the cheese.

But when the cat's away....well, you know the story, those mice come out to play.

Timidly, tip-toeing out to the cheese one of the bravest “thought leader” mice will take a big bite out of the cheese—an instant and positive, immediate, certain reward for risk taking! Go mouse go.

These are the first employees to test leadership’s mettle and ability to lead. As soon as the other mice see that eating the cheese is working out pretty good for the “thought leader” mouse, they realize that if you snooze, you lose. One by one they take their own respective bites out of the cheese and before you know it every bit of it is gone.

In a similar fashion, the “cheese” of modern business has been nibbled away so that today we have an alarming shortage of worker commitment, due to the failure of leaders to create positive reinforcement for their high achievers.

In fact, during the past economic meltdown (I call it the second Great Depression), the reward for doing a great job was that you got to keep your job and you were given the jobs of the three or four co-workers who were laid off. Of course, you didn’t get a pay raise for this. USA Today reported recently that these “used and abused” overworked workers who were denied overtime and bonuses during the last great economic downturn are filing lawsuits in droves against their employers, demanding back pay for excessive hours worked.

Sounds like it’s payback time.... (and long overdue in my book).

Hey, sorry, I got distracted. Let’s get back to the ranch...here are the questions I need to answer for you...

1. How precisely *do you get more positive reinforcement in your management system?*
2. How well are our best behavior based safety cultures doing at delivering the positive reinforcement that people crave and need?

I would LOVE to answer this for you but the captain says it’s time for our plane to push back (I’m leaving Vegas heading to speak in San Francisco tomorrow). In my next article I’ll cover both these points and a whole lot more. I guess I better buckle up. See you next month.

The End....

What would you like Bill to write about in his next column?

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