Leadership Malaise Part 2: Ending Operational Insanity

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Introduction

In our last article we introduced our 2019 topic of the seemingly never-ending problem of Leadership Malaise. Year after year, surveys show leaders to be ineffectual and dragging down or limiting the growth of their organizations. In this article we want to attempt to look at the core of this problem – why is this continually happening and why can't we seem to end this insanity of doing the same thing and expecting different results? It clearly is not working.

We will look at how leaders and organizations demotivate; deadwood and how it does or doesn't get addressed; the status quo culture; and how the use of tactics like fear and intimidation can drag down the company or organization. Like the last article we are trying to understand why overall leadership continues to fail as shown by the recurring surveys, that we have referenced many times, where views of leaders are less than encouraging – i.e. the leadership malaise.

Organizational Demotivation

Why would an organization want to demotivate employees? It just doesn't make sense, does it? And yet it happens all the time. Probably every one of us has experienced it during our working lives. It is counter-intuitive when clearly every organization wants to succeed and grow. The problem lies with the people who make up the organization. Of course there would be no organization without the people, but the behavior of the people – especially those in leadership positions – set the tone of the organization and can quickly demotivate those lower on the organization chart. Sometimes this demotivation is unintended, and sometimes it is overt.

How many of our readers have heard from someone in an organization that "we don't do it that way here" or "keep your head down and don't rock the boat" or "don't ask questions; just do what you are told and you will get ahead here" or "ideas come down they don't go up from us". We could probably fill pages with these demotivators. Our goal is not a comprehensive list but to understand why such statements are made.

In an ideal world everyone is dedicated to the growing success of their organization and know that their personal success will follow. Unfortunately, we don't live in an ideal world and many in an organization just want to protect their turf and look out for themselves. A new employee or someone just back from a training program brings up new ideas, which are too often perceived as a threat to the turf or to a supervisor or manager. They want to stop those threats quickly! In the past, one of your authors worked for a large organization and was in a lower level management position. When sent to a several weeks long, nationally recognized leadership training program, he learned lots of great ideas and techniques, some of which clearly applicable to the organization. He returned to the job filled with these new ideas, at the ready to implement several that would pay immediate dividends. Quickly the boss said "we don't do things that way here, you were sent to that program because it is a needed career step to move within the organization, but forget those ideas for here, and keep doing what we have always done." In other words, it was a "ticket to be punched" for future growth. The ideas were nice, but don't think about implementing them. Talk about demotivation!

There are many contributing factors to demotivation. Too often

unrealistic goals are established. It is good to provide challenging goals, but they must be realistic and attainable. Constantly setting totally unrealistic goals is going to quickly discourage and demotivate employees. How often do employees do an excellent job without receiving any appropriate recognition? Recognition doesn't always have to be given with a lot of fanfare or financial rewards. Often just acknowledging good work is sufficient but way too often not even that occurs. If you want to discourage someone

organizations. They are all demotivators and will impact the overall performance of the organization. They are not new. They have existed for years and years but still it goes on.

Deadwood

No not the old HBO show, but the real life situation in so many companies. Every organization will accumulate people who become deadwood. Maybe it is complacency or lack of skills or
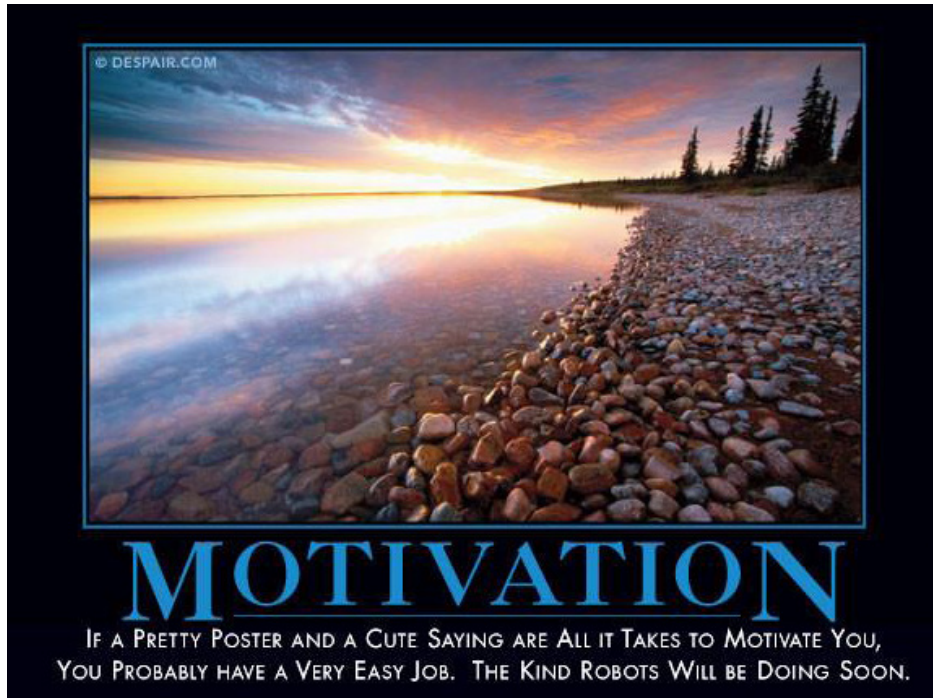
who does an outstanding job time and again, don't acknowledge that good work and take them for granted.

Are people being held accountable? Recognizing good work is essential, but promptly addressing poor work is equally important. The organization knows who is not carrying their share of the load. Addressing the "slackers" appropriately will be recognized by the employees and will build additional trust. Addressing such issues certainly should be done in private, but it will be recognized and noted by others. Are promotions based on performance or who likes who? Not every good performer will make a good supervisor, but if favoritism is used and not performance, the employees will certainly know that performance is not important.

Finally, and there are many examples, we refer to as, the program du jour effect. An initiative is 'sold' to management as essential to some type of improvement. There is a huge fanfare with the program, a kickoff, teams, meetings etc., only to have the whole thing fizzle out after a few months. So a new one comes along, with the same effect. Does anyone think this will ever be effective? How can leaders actually believe their people will be motivated to tackle the next program du jour?

These and many other situations happen every day in many

laziness or being demotivated and not having the personal pride to continue to try and excel. Maybe it is the proverbial square peg trying to fit in a round hole. Whatever the reason there will be people who are not doing what is expected of them. How these people are dealt with has an impact on the organization. The employees know who these people are and resent that they have to do work that these people should be doing. The employees carefully watch to see how the deadwood is dealt with. If they are not dealt with, the other employees will often start to slack off since it is clear that nothing happens to deadwood.

Manager and supervisors must recognize and address employees who slip into the wall-paper and become invisible. They are not all candidates for termination, but management must work to identify why these employees are not doing their jobs as expected. Is it a lack of training? Is it the wrong skill set in the wrong position? Is it unclear expectations? What is causing this disconnect between performance and expectations? The cause cannot be assumed. Discussions with the employee must be held and they must be in good faith with a goal of understanding and wanting to help the employee. Are there personality issues with coworkers? Is there training needed? Is a change of assignments needed? There are a multitude of possible explanations but understanding is needed to help the employee and the entire organization. The point here

is deadwood becomes a malaise in and of itself, then becomes contagious, and ultimately becomes cultural. There are tools to clearly identify functions people perform, why they perform them, how long it takes, who receives their work, etc. in order to systematically work through the process objectively.

Status Quo Culture

"We don't do things that way here." "New ideas are not welcome

or needed." "It's not broken so don't try and fix it." So many of us have heard these or similar statements from bosses over the years. Amazingly, it still happens. Too many organizations and supervisors/managers just want status quo. Things are working (maybe) and disruptions are not welcome. New ideas and change create extra work and push people out of their comfort zones. Whether is it new software or new ideas on how to improve work flow, it is a challenge to the comfortable status quo. The widgets are getting out the front door or the accounts are being reconciled or the designs are getting done eventually. 99% of people do not like change. They get in a groove and things get done. Maybe not efficiently but they are getting done or seem to be getting done.

Your authors have worked for and with companies where this has proven itself time and again. An example – working with a large organization trying to look at existing processes and find more effective ways to get work done, we looked at an engineering process for making changes to existing plant systems. Mapping out the existing process identified many workarounds to the established "process" that made the actual process a far cry from the documented process. Why were there workarounds? Employees felt some steps were cumbersome or managers consistently held up the review and approval steps or a myriad of other causes. So the employees established ways to workaround those bottlenecks.

Were these workarounds efficient or effective? In a few cases yes, but in most cases they actually created more work and complexity rather than addressing the root causes of the bottlenecks. But talking to the employees about formally reviewing and improving the process brought great cries of anger. The employees did not want to see their status quo changed. People don't like change to be imposed on them. Companies, like employees, are change averse. Change is perceived as a threat or at least a scary unknown and a challenge to the status quo. The status quo may be dragging the organization down or impeding growth but the status quo is comfortable and routine. Change is uncomfortable and challenges the routine.

Fear and Intimidation

Fear and intimidation is dinosaur leadership. This type of leadership can take on several forms, but the essence of each is a leader, manager or senior executive who has the proverbial leash on their employees. The leash manifests itself in many ways. Some of the leashes include:

- Employee options are limited, and jobs are essential to an employee's financial survival
- A specific job is desirable and similar opportunities are limited
- Retirement programs
- Incentive programs (profit sharing etc.)
- Relocation is not an option
- Retraining or learning a new skill

When options become limited and employers know it, they tend to exercise their power in less than effective ways.

What are the consequences to both the employees and the organization? Resentment, low productivity caused by grumbling

and overall distraction, even potentially sabotage. The culture becomes very sick, and the chasm continues to get bigger. Management reacts to the above consequences, employees react equally and in an opposite direction.

We see the retirement and incentive leash. Employees get locked in. These programs, which should be motivators, become demotivators because the employer uses the loss of them to leverage their own agenda. Relocation can be big leash, the threat of moving a company, to many, can be very intimidating. You have a job, but we are moving 1,000 miles away. Finally, when a business entity, for profit or more so, non-profit, offer a highly desirable service; say a tourist attraction that is trusted to care for precious things either historic artifacts or living things like animals in zoos, or fun centered activities, many people work there for the love of the "place" itself. They either love the historical aspect, or love caring for animals or love seeing people having fun. These become leashes. They overlook management abuses because of the higher calling they envision themselves having.

To be fair, there are times when senior management has limited choices too, but we are using these examples of ways employees can become demotivated, and cultures become sick.

Clearly fear and intimidation are not effective management tools, but they are one that is way too common. Managers and supervisors who use this technique clearly don't value their employees. They feel they only know what is best for the organization. This goes along with status quo and demotivation. Employees – or at least those who decide to stick around in the organization – become used to being bullied and not valued. Those who have ideas for improvements are afraid to voice those ideas for fear of being put down. The leader who has such a "my way or the highway" attitude is doing substantial damage to the organization. Managing by brute force is not managing but just the opposite.

Summary

We titled this article Ending Operational Insanity because that is what organizations are dealing with – operational insanity. Demotivating employees, devaluing employees, not addressing deadwood, bully managing, and taking a "don't rock the boat" attitude are all common activities occurring daily in organizations. Not necessarily intentionally but still existing and keeping employees and the organization itself from growing. Fortunately, these traits are not inherent in all supervisors and managers. A lot of these traits are learned from the predecessor in the position. It worked for him/her so obviously that is the way to succeed in this organization. And the circle goes on and on and the annual management surveys continue to show a lack of trust and respect for executives. In our next article we will discuss ways to break this cycle and answer the question of how we develop new attitudes in organizational leadership.