

LeaderPerfect Newsletter

August 15, 2005

A Vital Key To Motivational Leadership

by Dr. Mike Armour

Some wit has said that there are only two types of people in the world. Those who divide everything into two groups. And those who don't.

Well, for purposes of this article I'm dividing everyone into two groups. We'll call the first group the options folk. The second we'll refer to as procedures people. Understanding the differences between these two is critical to successful motivational leadership.

Options folk, as their name implies, like lots of choices. Tons of options. They thrive on choices. Indeed, they smother under rules and regulations that require them to do things the same way over and over.

Procedures people, on the other hand, love structure. Options are relatively unimportant to them. In fact, they may resist options. They just want a dependable, predictable, reliable way to get things done, time after time.

Options, Procedures, and Training

I first came to realize the stark difference between these two groups in the mid-1990s. As a senior naval reserve officer, I was managing information technology and systems security for 150 units of a national intelligence command. We were in the midst of the transition from DOS-based operating systems to Windows, and among other things, I oversaw the training to effect this transition. Occasionally I even delivered the training myself, just to evaluate our curriculum in a "living lab."

Being one of the options folk myself, I like to know all the different ways I can do things. So when introducing newbies to the Windows platform, I loved to demonstrate the flexibility that Windows provides. The flow of my original training design went something like this: "You can start this program by clicking on this icon, or by dropping down this menu, or by using this keyboard shortcut, or by . . ."

About that time I would start getting push-back. "Wait a minute," some trainee would object. "Can you just show me one way that will work for me all the time?"

Being a true-blood options guy, I would typically respond (until I learned better), "Sure, I can teach you only one way to do it. But if you know all the choices that are available, you can always use the one that allows you to work most efficiently." To which I often got the reply, "Hang efficiency!! I simply want to know that I can follow a given procedure and know that the computer will always do what I want."

Meanwhile, others in the class were thrilled to learn about all the options. These "options folk" typically gave my trainings great reviews. Not so with the procedures people, who just wanted a simple reliable step-by-step process that they could always count on.

Eventually I realized that I had to accommodate both groups in my training. Then it dawned on me that I also had to accommodate both groups in my leadership style.

Options, Procedures, and Leadership

Looking at my staff I realized that I had both options folk and procedures people reporting to me. Procedures people responded well when I tasked them by spelling out the specific steps I wanted them to take in carrying out an assignment.

But that same level of detail and "forced routine" completely demotivated my options folk. With them I had to avoid too much emphasis on procedures. To get their best effort, I needed to lay out a broad outline of what I wanted from them, suggest possible approaches they might take, and assure them that they were free to develop other approaches, as they saw fit. No procedures. No step-by-step guidance. Just a clear statement of desired outcomes and empowerment to develop the best options for getting there.

Assessing Your Team and Culture

Look around you at those you lead. More than likely your team consists of both options folk and procedures people. Can you identify who belongs in which group? And isn't it interesting that both groups are equally intelligent, equally competent? They just prefer a different kind of construct in which to work.

Further, I've observed that certain types of businesses and industries have cultures that are more oriented toward options or procedures. My leadership development practice takes me into some of America's largest corporations. Those that are heavy on engineering or that are part of a highly regulated industry tend to be procedures-driven. Others, such as cutting edge technology companies, are more likely to be options-driven.

Some of my most frustrated clients are options folk who find themselves in a procedures-driven culture. Or procedures people whose career has landed them in an options-driven culture. I sometimes have to tell them that it's easier to change companies than to change their own company.

Stretching Yourself As A Leader

As leaders the most important "take away" from these reflections is that not everyone is like us. Whether I'm one of the procedures people or one of the options folk, I have to motivate people who are of the opposing preference. And that takes some "getting used to."

Even after I identified the procedures people on my Navy staff, I felt uncomfortable tasking them by laying out specific procedures for them to follow. That kind of tasking would have stifled me, so I felt inside that I was micro-managing to give such detailed guidance. Repeatedly, however, I saw that my procedures people were happiest and

worked most effectively when I set aside my personal discomfort and gave them assignments in keeping with their own need for procedures.

You may face the opposite challenge. If you are a procedures person yourself, tasking your options folk in a way that motivates them will likely leave you uncomfortable at first. You will hear an inner voice that says you've not given them sufficient structure and that they are likely to go off willy-nilly and do something unwise. But ignore that inner voice. Relax, sit back, and watch your options people really perform when you give them the freedom they cherish.

© 2005, MCA Professional Services Group, LLC

This article may be posted to a web site so long as all copyright notices are preserved, along with an associated link to www.leaderperfect.com. You are also free to circulate this document in hard-copy form so long as the copyright statement and this notice remain attached.