

MOTIVATE, DON'T SEDUCE

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A new leader, meeting for the first time with the employees of a recently-acquired company, tells them with a warm smile, "Don't worry, little will change. You are good people and I'm looking forward to working with each of you." As we fast forward to one year later, in fact much has changed – 20% of the employees have been downsized and 25% had to move to a new location. As for the new leader and his staff – to quote one of the employees, "Our new leadership tells you one thing and does something else. You just can't trust them! Remember the days when we didn't have to put up with this."

Through my personal experiences over the past 30 years in working with companies' merger and acquisition change processes, I don't believe the leadership of acquiring companies is blatantly dishonest. The problem is that many leaders are not careful with what they communicate and make promises they can't keep. To put it another way, they think they are motivating the employees by saying things they believe the employees want to hear, when in fact they are "seducing" them! And the result of seduction in the long run is neither pleasant nor productive – and the long run can be a matter of days or weeks.

The motivation and trust problem that comes through "seduction" goes far beyond leadership in acquiring a company. One needs to look no further than what we do as parents or with personal friends. And I say "we" because I know that as a father, I told my children on occasion something that I wanted them to do – and made "promises" of what I would do in return without thinking about "Can I really do them?"

If we go to still another work case, how often has an organization said "We have a pay-for-performance approach to compensation in this organization. If you do well you will be rewarded with increased compensation as well as a greater chance of being promoted." And yet most everyone in many organizations knows the degree of compensation differences among the line employees (and they really do know!) is little. And often in our travels we will hear a high performer who has been in the same job for some time – "I'm still waiting for that job with more responsibility they promised us." The language actually didn't include the word "promise," but people believe they were – and what they believe is what really counts in the way of their motivation. Again, at the end of the day they have been "seduced."

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Finally, let's turn to a common manager-employee problem – the manager who literally “promises” to do something if the employee will do something. For example, a manager says, “If you will commit to work some overtime to get the project done, I will personally spend more time with you,” is in trouble when he or she doesn't follow through with the promised personal help on the project – especially when the employee has worked diligently to complete the project, including putting in considerable overtime. The employee's perspective is, “I've had to complete the project without the help that my manager promised me.” In the process of “motivating” (really “seducing”) the employee, the manager has violated the equity relationship principle. From the perspective of the employee (and any objective bystander) they have not given but have only taken! The more damaging outcome is that this results in diminishing “trust” of the manager by the employee, and most often a diminished work effort. And sadly, this kind of managerial behavior can eventually result in the loss of the quality employee – “Even though they pay me well here, I guess I'll go find a place to work where people treat me fairly.” (Translated: treat me equitably.) *

Perhaps the real lesson here is an old one: “We should think before we speak.” Whether as the leader of an acquiring company, the manager of employees, or a parent, if we don't do this, our alleged “motivation” (really “seduction”) could turn into a serious motivation problem!

*For more information on this subject, see: Huseman, R. and Hayes, M. (2002). GIVE TO GET LEADERSHIP: THE SECRET OF THE HIDDEN PAYCHECK. Equity Press.

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