

# Why competent management

But poor leadership can destroy the underlying factors that underpin job satisfaction



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Imagine writing a management book concluding that today's employees are seeking much the same out of their jobs as their parents, most people like the work that they do and that the most important features of a job are fair treatment, a sense of achievement and getting on with colleagues. Where's the story in that?

Picture the look on a publishing editor's face when three respected management writers deliver such straightforward observations in their completed manuscript.

Where's the cheese, and why hasn't anyone moved it? Where's the stuff on leadership and strategy?

Fortunately a glance at *The Enthusiastic Employee, How Companies Profit by Giving*

*Work - What They Want* aroused enough curiosity to delve a little deeper.

Within a few pages of the first chapter it was clear, however that the authors were going to dismay any manager looking for snappy answers. Put simply, their message is that if you treat people with respect, trust them, pay them reasonably and give them a degree of responsibility for their work and some job security, the vast majority will do a decent job.

Deep down, I think most of us understand this. Unfortunately this message is not going to fill an MBA course. But the authors have a wealth of research to prove their points. The book is based on evidence from 4m survey responses garnered in 30 years of consulting by Sirota, a US based industrial organisational psychologist.

David Sirota founder of the consultancy, has been around long enough to have witnessed claims about the employment aspirations of successive generations from the baby boomers through Generation X

and Generation Y to something today that has been called Generation D (where D stands for digital). All of these claims, he says, are symptomatic of a "tendency to confuse youthful tastes with human needs".

When the vagaries of fashion and the distortion of memory over time are put to one side, his conclusion is that: "There is no evidence that younger workers are more (or less) disenchanted than their elders."

It was this persistent vein of disenchantment, however, that prompted Mr Sirota and his co authors, Lewis Mischkind and Michael Meltzer, to extend their investigation of employee attitudes. If most employees enjoy their work and Sirota's job satisfaction rate from thousands of surveys is 76 per cent why do so many become sick of their jobs?

The answer, according to the same surveys, is that poor management often erodes one or all of the three underlying factors that underpin job satisfaction: achievement, fair treatment and social acceptance among workmates. Hence the message in the title. It should be possible to deliver on such simple needs. Not so.

Too many managers show themselves to be extraordinarily adept at wrecking the natural enthusiasm of employees for their work.

To ask how employees can be motivated, say the authors, is the wrong approach. "Most people enter a new organisation and job with enthusiasm eager to work, to contribute, to feel proud of their work and their organisations, they write. "Perversely many managers then appear to do their best to demotivate employees."

The employee sense of achievement is put down to six factors by the authors: the challenge of the work, the acquisition of skills, ability to perform the job, the perceived importance of the job, recognition received for a job well done and pride in the company.

Most can be influenced strongly by management input. The provision of training, resources, responsibility and co-operation from colleagues will assist an employee's ability to work well. Recognition, no more complicated than a simple "thank you" from a customer or a boss can influence perceptions that the work is valued.

# means happy workers

Yet too many bosses have an inability to hand out praise. I am not talking here about effusive mentions in dispatches. A brief remark such as "I liked that" or "you did that well" is usually sufficient. As Mark Twain once commented: "You can live two months on a good compliment."

The survey rates for manager feedback were far poorer than those for general job satisfaction. Half of employees claimed to have sufficient feedback and too much tended to be negative. Constructive feedback is all too rare.

As the authors stress, everyone needs feedback but they argue that giving effective feedback on an employee's performance is one of the tasks that managers find most difficult. This is why annual appraisals can be a painful process for all concerned. But the appraisal, they argue should be seen as nothing more or less than a summary of performance in the past year and what might be done in the next year. But any corrective comments need to be made as and when they are needed rather than reserved for the big appraisal.

While the book agrees that

people prefer praise to criticism, it argues that most people do want to learn where they could be doing something better and how they might improve.

Part of the problem for managers, say the authors, lies in the reactions of a few thin-skinned employees who are sensitive to criticism. Their responses can undermine a manager's confidence that may be paper thin, particularly if the manager has no idea about how to go about discussing an employee's need for improvement.

This second comment comes down to the heart of the management problem.

Too many people are promoted to supervisory roles without any adequate assessment of whether they are up to their new responsibility or useful schooling in how to handle people.

In the worst cases, their technical incompetence may be one of the reasons they get promoted in the first place. How is that kind of manager going to win the respect of anyone?

The hesitant, unconfident manager, it seems, is more typical than the bully who is unrelenting in finding fault. But

this openly criticising approach, say the authors, is common in the way some under managers are treated by their own bosses.

This is reflected in a macho belief that being able to take criticism is something that goes with the job. Anyone who has been watching the recent television series, *The Apprentice*, will appreciate this observation.

The book's short course on giving feedback is probably worth the cover price alone. One of its most telling comments is that people who are doing a good job, but not necessarily the greatest job, need to know that their work is appreciated.

The star performers will always hog the limelight but sometimes the beam needs to be cast over the unsung employees. There is far too much good material in this book to feature all of it. The simplest lessons always seem the most difficult to teach.

*The Enthusiastic Employee, How Companies Profit By Giving Workers What They Want*, by David Strota, Louis A. Mischkind and Michael Irwin Meltzer is published by Wharton School Publishing, price \$26.95.  
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