
New Kid on the Block: Understanding What Motivation Your Team Needs

Series: Part 3

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Many executives rise to levels of authority that exceed their knowledge and skill. That is the principle that Lawrence J. Peter so famously articulated. That one rises to their level of incompetence is to be expected. You do a good job in your current position and are promoted until you reach a position for which you are not competent. Then you fail and you, and everyone else, begin to wonder if you ever were as good as you seemed to be.

What to do about it? Assuming you have reached your level of incompetence, consider what skills you possess that are still useful in your current positions. Many will be. But some will be counter-productive. A recent example: a very successful college football coach takes on the head coaching position of a professional football team. There is no question that the individual has the necessary knowledge of and passion for the game, the experience shaping a team, motivating players, and has a winning attitude.

At first the new pro coach succeeds spectacularly. His enthusiasm alone is enough to rouse a similar passion in seasoned professional players, especially those mired in the middle where neither success nor failure can stimulate them. But something happens after the first round of success. The players begin to find the new coach's rah-rah approach somehow demeaning to a professional. The usually unspoken complaint is, "Hey, I'm a professional. This is my business. I know what I can do and how to do it. Save your cheerleading for the rookies. It annoys me."

Professionals like to believe they are above emotion. When things get tough they keep on punching; when things are great, they are not deluded into believing they are gods. They adhere to the advice Kipling gave and treat both victory and defeat as the imposters they are.

Coaching a young, naïve, unformed athlete, no matter how great the talent, is not the same as coaching a tested, battle hardened veteran. Recognition, reinforcement, and acknowledgement, while important at every level, are especially significant with professionals. The amateur still hears the coach shouting, still feels the kick in the behind, and still responds to emotion. Which means that the amateur also is less dependable than the professional, too likely to give up before the game is over or to celebrate too early. The professional is much more likely to keep their head in the game.

Whether the game is football or finance, love or money, the need to understand the motivations of the team you are expected to lead or be part of, is vital. Many people work simply to make enough money to support themselves, yet these people also find camaraderie, comfort, and meaning in their work. Others, more ambitious, work for power and glory. They too find a work environment that addresses their needs as social animals.

People will tell you from their behavior what they need from you. Your job is to listen and give it to them. A handshake or a kick in the butt, a trophy or a raise, respect and recognition in keeping with the individual's sense of themselves.