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Happiness is your responsibility

By Paperitalo Staff

I was in a large mill a few weeks ago visiting with an old friend who is now the senior executive on the site. He and I go back nearly two decades and have seen many attempts at managing large mills over that period, many more unsuccessful than successful. The following is not a new topic for him and me, but one line of reasoning from this hashed and rehashed conversation may be interesting to you.

It is simply this: happiness in your career or job is not the responsibility of your employer--it is solely your responsibility, just as it is in a family or any other human relationship. Now, granted, your employer can deliver overt and covert actions and conditions that can make you unhappy, but what appears to be the opposite is just not true. As an example, let us take the position of pulp mill superintendent. Suppose you are a young technician who has an excellent pulp and paper education and has served your employer faithfully for 3 years. Suddenly the position of pulp mill superintendent opens up and you are appointed to it. You are pleased, but your employer's objective was not to please you but to fill a needed role.

Rewind the tape. The same position of pulp mill superintendent opens up. You are appointed to it because your employer needs you there, just like above. The difference is you have been with the company for 20 years, have been production manager of a large mill for 5 years, the job is three states away and you have children in high school. I can guarantee your employer has just made you unhappy.

No, it is not your employer's responsibility to make you happy. Happiness, in every part of your life, is up to you. Your employer's responsibility is to keep you motivated. Motivation can take many forms. Sometimes it involves money, sometimes increased benefits. Sometimes it involves reprimands and performance reviews of brutal honesty. Sometimes it is the fear of closing a facility that brings the workers to a point of inspired innovation.

POSITIVE MOTIVATION

Motivation, in the context I mention here, has historically been seen as negative or worse. For

some, words such as "slave driver" come to mind when motivation is mentioned. For the record, I abhor and do not accept the practice of abuse of any kind: verbal, physical, racial slurs and worse (despite the fact that my nickname in one paper mill I managed was "Sledge" as in sledgehammer). Practitioners of such junk should be prosecuted within the fullest extent of the law. I support only the positive aspects of motivation, such as studying hard to get a college degree, working hard to get that next promotion and so forth. Keep in mind, I consider a positive aspect of motivation to include the brutally honest performance review that inspires you to correct your deficiencies (positive motivation is not always just sweetness and light). These motivations are the responsibility of a good employer and will produce a superior operation, be it a department, division, or a company.

Some people dwell on unhappiness. My friend and I call that playing the game "Ain't it awful?" You can easily succeed at this game if you want to and thus assure yourself of being unhappy all the time. I once worked in a facility where the machinists in the maintenance department had some of the best tools available--everything was state of the art. They had convinced themselves, however, that all they had was junk because they were caught up in playing "Ain't it awful?" It was not long before the facility decided, due to poor productivity, to outsource all machining and eliminate the machinists. They found out how awful it could really be (because of seniority, they were able keep their well-paying jobs, but found themselves riding lawn-mowers and doing other interesting tasks in the maintenance department, displacing the lowest seniority workers).

DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY

Bottom line, if you have been looking at your employer to make you happy, forget it. If you are a manager and think it is your job to keep your subordinates happy, it is not. Motivation is the key and the very best companies practice it religiously. ##