

# Mind

The way you communicate decisions may be having an adverse effect on your members' motivation

By Kriss Garcia

# Made Up?



One of the first interview questions you will be asked when you compete for an executive position: How do you motivate your staff? The question implies that there's a simple answer, and that if you only knew it, you could accomplish grand feats of leadership and the organization would be at your beck and call. Of course, that's simply not true.

Motivation is complex in part because it's both intentional and unintentional, and because it's very easy for our best efforts to actually *de-motivate* our employees.

Intentional de-motivation comes when we manipulate good and bad consequences based upon the individual, rather than behavior. *Example:* In some departments the "good ol' boy" system works to de-motivate outsiders.

What this article focuses on, however, is not intentional de-motivation but on how, with *good* intentions, leaders de-motivate individuals and workgroups through their inability to appropriately handle the decision-making process.

## WHAT IT IS ... & ISN'T

Many leaders confuse motivation with control or manipulation. Nothing could be further from the truth. Motivation is not something that you do *to* someone. In the workplace, motivation is a way of influencing the environment to stimulate employees to achieve a particular objective. Of course, there will always be employees who are beyond motivation.

Motivation can be broken down into two main types: *intrinsic*, which is based upon personal enjoyment or a feeling of obligation one has to do a good job (intangible elements), and *extrinsic*, which is based upon some form of external reward or coercion (tangible elements such as promotion or pay). Intrinsic motivation tends to influence behavior over the long term; extrinsic over the short term.

If we as leaders don't irreversibly de-motivate our workforce, intrinsic motivation can influence many firefighters for their entire career. Doing a good job because they enjoy serving the public is the most basic of these intrinsic motivators. Extrinsicly speaking, pay is probably one of the most obvious motivators. But many

experts say that the duration of influence upon one's behavior based upon pay is two pay periods. Don't get me wrong; everyone needs a base pay that reflects the organization's commitment to them and respect for the efforts they put forth. But pay alone is not enough to carry you contentedly through 20–30 years in the fire service.

## HOW DECISIONS AFFECT MOTIVATION

It's a mistake to think about motivation only coming from stature, advancement or pay. One of the most powerful ways leaders can positively influence employees' level of motivation is by making and sharing decisions effectively and appropriately.

Emergency decisions that are time-critical are not generally the problem; these decisions come to most of us fairly logically and are based upon years of experience and education. Rather, it's the day-to-day operational decisions that start us down the road to de-motivating our workforce.

Day-to-day decisions fit into one of three categories:

- *Administrative decisions* are those the administration will make and be totally responsible for. These decisions may come with some or no input from any workgroup.
- *Participative decisions* are ones where administration is legitimately requesting input but will still make the final decision.
- *Committee-based decisions* occur when administration completely turns over the process and outcome of a decision to the committee.

Why do we care about distinguishing between the three types of decisions? Regardless of what type of decision you're going to make, the method must be communicated with absolute certainty. Before the decision is considered, no one should question the type of decision-making style you are going to use. Without this step, individuals and workgroups may believe that they have the final say in the decision when in fact they don't—which will in turn lead to them being de-motivated. So, let's take a closer look at the three types.



### Administrative decisions

When communicating administrative decisions, make clear that the time for input has come and gone and the decision is made. You must also choose whether to indicate to staff *why* such a decision was made. My rule of thumb: Unless it's confidential, how you came to the decision should be communicated.

Expedience, not convenience, should be the driving factor in selecting the administrative type of decision. If you ever have to point to the brass on your lapel as the reason people should accept your decision, you're probably moving down the road of de-motivation.

Most effective leaders use administrative decisions sparingly; when they do use them, it's often to address safety issues. *Example:* There's been a confrontation between two firefighters where threats have been made. The administrative decision would be to remove one of the members involved from duty until facts and consequences can be assessed.

### Participative decisions

Most of your day-to-day decisions should be participative. The quality of any decision is based upon good people using the best information and data possible. Most often, participative decision-making involves seeking recommendations from various individuals and workgroups, then weighing the options. Cultivating a participative style is one of the most important skills for administrators. Participative decisions are not made in haste; they are made by deliberately seeking alternatives and exploring all relative possibilities.

Once again, the workgroup or individual giving you information or a recommendation must understand that they're not making the final decision, but rather providing options with pros and cons, and that you retain the right to select one of the group's options or a mix thereof.

An example of a participative decision: There's an obvious need to restructure the battalion chiefs' response districts. The administration selects several battalion chiefs to propose

a solution, and assigns a facilitator to focus the discussion. The Nominal Group Technique (NGT) may be of value in nurturing participation and support for the decision and the process. In short, the NGT is a more controlled variant of brainstorming used in problem-solving sessions to encourage creative thinking.

*Tip:* If your mind is already made up, make an administrative decision. Don't waste the group's time and efforts trying to convince them that you're right or to "decide" what you already know will be your final decision. Changing the ground rules that you set forth to make a decision spells motivational disaster.

*Note:* You must set parameters and guidelines before the process begins, such as timeline and budget, but keep them short and few in number to nurture the decision-making process.

*"Motivation is the art of getting people to do what you want them to because they want to do it."*

*—President Dwight Eisenhower*

### Committee-based decisions

The third and final type of decision is one based upon logic and trust. Decisions that you turn over to a committee require explicit expectations, guidelines and parameters, including time expectations, budget constraints and the fact that the decision must be a group consensus. You may need to educate the workgroup on how to proceed with the decision. *Remember:* You're still the steward over the decision process; you

must make sure it's inclusive and fair.

*Example:* There's been interest from a large portion of the workgroup to modify the shift schedule. There are no operational concerns regardless of the decision. Parameters are set, and you allow a fair process to proceed while you watch from the sidelines.

*Tip:* Regardless of what you may think is the best decision, if the group follows the ground rules, its decision must be respected. Therefore, you must have a great deal of trust in the group. Vetoing the decision after you told them it was theirs to make will spell disaster for the work group's future efforts, and de-motivation will start to creep into the organization.

Don't think about motivation only coming from stature, advancement or pay. One of the most powerful ways we can positively influence employees' level of motivation is through how we as leaders make and share decisions.





## Mind Made Up?

### IT'S ALL ABOUT THE FRAMEWORK

Both participative and committee-based decisions have the potential to motivate or de-motivate. The way you steward the process will determine future efforts and involvement or the motivational level of the work group. When done right, these types of decisions produce solutions best fit for the issue, and ones that the groups are very likely to buy into. This buy-in or support is very important, because the group can then turn around and help you sell the decision to the larger organization.

Once we have set up the decision-making process correctly and the workgroups have made or assisted in making the day-to-day decisions, we are essentially modeling an intended route based on past experience and data. Just like weather forecasting or modeling, if conditions change, we must examine our decisions to see if they still meet their intent. Most decisions should have a formal review date where the original groups have an opportunity to modify the decision to meet the current environment. *Note:* Don't modify a participative or committee decision without once again involving the stakeholders.

### A FINAL WORD

When individuals know their opinions are valued and necessary for the success of the organization, they're much more likely to be content and productive. Happy people make for a happy organization, which in turn provides good service.

The question, then, is not how do we motivate, but rather, how do we stop demotivating? The answer: with legitimate, honest and open communications regarding the critical operational elements of our organization, how decisions are made and what we expect the employees' level of input into those decisions to be. With motivated employees as the foundation, there are few limits on the success your department can achieve.

A closing thought from General Colin Powell: "When we are debating an issue, loyalty means giving me your honest opinion, whether you think I'll like it or not. Disagreement, at this stage, stimulates me. But once a decision has been made, the debate ends. From that point on, loyalty means executing the decision as if it were your own." 🌟

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