Motivation and the Survey Technician

By Brian Munday, General Manager, ISTO

Late one Friday afternoon, Terry and Steve came back from the field. Terry, a Party Chief for the last 21 years, was frustrated. Steve, his instrumentperson, had been with Eric Reid's surveying firm for the last six weeks. Steve was equally frustrated.

Eric Reid who had had his own small survey business for the last 16 years could see that his crew was not getting along. When Terry and Steve returned from the field, Eric found out that only a small portion of the layout work was completed and that it would require at least two more full days to complete the assignment - putting the job well over budget. Eric lit into his two crew members for their sloppy and slow work. Everyone left the office depressed. It was going to be a miserable weekend.

The next day, Terry decided to sit in his backyard, enjoy the sun, and have a few beers. His neighbour, who was just finishing mowing the lawn, asked Terry, "How's it going?" Instead of replying with the usual "OK, fine", Terry really told him how it was going.

"Well," Terry began, "the trouble started when our former instrumentperson left us to work as a Party Chief at another firm. He'd been with us for seven or eight years. He really knew his stuff. I hated to see him go. We worked really well together."

"And then Eric hired this Steve fellow right out of the local community college's survey program. That was his biggest mistake as far as I am concerned."

"Why?" replied Terry's neighbour.

"Reid asked me to show him the ropes, y'know, how surveying is really done. But I never figured I would have to do the job for him. We'd only been out in the field a week when I knew it wasn't going to work out. I asked him to do a simple task - one that I've done thousands of time out in the field. Then Steve starts: 'that isn't the way our teacher showed us how to do it' or 'I never knew we had to do that' or 'are you sure this is right?' It was driving me crazy."

"One day, I asked him to stand across the street by the fence post so I could take the measurement. If our old Instrumentperson was here, he would have known what to do next, but Steve? No way. I had to explain to him to set up next at the fire hydrant which he should have known. I barked at him to get his act together - just so he knew that I was upset. But that just caused more problems. He started dragging the equipment (this is expensive stuff, y'know) and getting careless with how he set up his points. We started to have to take stuff in for repairs."

"It got to the point where I wouldn't let him load or unload any of the equipment in the trucks. If a point wasn't set up the way I wanted it, I would walk to where he was and make sure that it was set properly. Sometimes, I would just walk over to him to make sure he was set up properly even if it seemed alright from where I was."

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"That's why all these jobs are taking us so long!"

"Now it's getting worse. Steve's showing up late for work. Leaving early. He hardly says anything to me on the way to the site. Our other instrumentperson and I would talk all the time and it was great. This college kid is showing his true colours now. He's just plain lazy. He doesn't know what hard work is really all about. I bet, I hope, Eric Reid fires him before too long."

Terry's neighbour remained quiet for a few moments and then responded thoughtfully, "This fellow, Steve, sounds like a really motivated worker. It's too bad you and Eric have caused him such problems."

"Him? Motivated? He's the problem. Not me." Terry quickly countered.

Most discussions around the topic of motivation usually start from two (faulty) assumptions.

First, people are lazy. They have to be motivated.

Second, you must provide some incentive (carrot or stick) to get them to be industrious.

A better discussion might begin with:

First, workers start off industrious. They are already motivated.

Second, they will be "de-motivated" as more barriers to them getting their job done are put in front of them.

See the difference? In the first scenario, we start with a very cynical view of human behaviour where man (and woman) must be whipped like Egyptian slaves to get them to act as their masters wish. As the centuries passed, we have stopped physically whipping people but our views on motivation remain the same. "Do this or else," is the common cry. Even so-called motivation schemes and speeches say, "Do this or else you don't win _____."

What are "barriers to motivation"? In brief, they are anything that upsets the "employee's expectation of satisfaction." What the heck does that mean?

When it comes to satisfaction, each person is different. Some people want to run their own business while others prefer job stability. Some want to work outdoors. Some like the indoors. Most people like to be praised for the work they know has been well done. Most want to take pride in the work they do whether its creating their own business, creating their own plan using Autocad, or

even creating their own hole in the ground if they are a bulldozer operator.

Most EXPECT that they will be able to create what they have wanted. When a person discovers that their expectation will not be realized, that is the time when they start to lose their motivation. Barriers have been put up that prevents a person from expecting that they will be able to achieve what they want.

What are barriers? It might be having arthritis if you are an artist, playing for a losing hockey team, being confounded by bureaucracy and paperwork, being unable to gain the trust of a co-worker. Some people will overcome these barriers if they are put in the way; other won't. It depends on their own expectations and own motivating factors. They cannot be manipulated by outside sources.

Getting back to our case study, Terry began to realize that Steve's lack of motivation was partly his fault. Looking back on the events of the last six weeks, Terry was starting to understand that no one was blameless and that he would have to give it his best try if he was to try to repair the fragile situation.

With the help of his neighbour, Terry identified some of the things that went wrong.

1. Terry expected that his new instrumentperson would be just like the one who left the company. It may take some time before Steve feels comfortable in his new position and willing to open up to Terry especially if their age difference will make it difficult for the two to find something in common to discuss. Terry, as senior Party Chief, should make sure the lines of communication are open.

> "Terry fell into the trap of taking over and doing the the work himself."

2. After 21 years as a Party Chief no one doubts Terry's ability or knowledge. After that many of years of experience, it is easy to forget how little he knew when he started out. Terry also realized that he had difficulty explaining his reasoning for doing the things he was doing. His work was second nature to him. He never had to explain his actions before.

3. Probably the greatest difficulty for anyone moving to a leadership-type role (such as that of a Party Chief) comes in delegating tasks to others. Terry knew what he wanted and he knew he could do it faster than he could explain it. "This job has to be done on time and I can't waste my time showing someone else how to do it. I can do it myself quicker," Terry reasoned. He's right. If Terry was the instrumentperson for this project, then, without a doubt, Terry could do it better and faster than Steve. But since Terry was the Party Chief, there is no way he could be both Party Chief and Instrumentperson and not compromise the quality and timeliness of the work.

While it may painful to watch at times, Steve will, in all likelihood, learn to be an excellent Instrumentperson and go on to be a good Party Chief just as Terry did many years ago. When Steve asked him (what he thought were silly) questions, Terry fell into the trap of taking over and doing the the work himself.

4. Steve came to the position as Instrumentperson motivated by the fact that he enjoyed the material he learned at college and that he was able to find work in the field he wanted when many of his classmates couldn't. For Steve, the barriers to motivation soon formed high all around him. These barriers were: Terry not answering Steve's questions, not being allowed/trusted to handle the equipment, Terry barking at Steve to get his act together, Terry comparing Steve with the former instrumentperson, Terry taking over and doing Steve's work.

Steve responded by not speaking with Terry, showing up late for work, and handling the equipment carelessly. This, in turn, caused deeper mistrust on Terry's part and their relationship spiralled downward.

5. Steve wondered if he made a mistake joining Eric Reid's firm. "Are all survey companies like this?" he asked himself. Steve realized that he too was partly to blame. Perhaps as a just-graduated survey technician, he didn't have all the answers and shouldn't say "You're supposed to do things this way" but say "Why are you doing things this way?" Steve's goal of becoming a Party Chief may have to be put on hold for a couple of years. Steve felt if he adjusted his expectations, he might again become the motivated instrumentperson he was when he walked through the office door for his first day.

6. Eric Reid, like Terry, would rather yell at people about things not getting done instead of finding out why they were not done in the first place. Yelling is the easy thing to do. Sometimes it is necessary - but more often there is a reason why something didn't get done. Don't blow your stack; find out the reasons why.

Terry now had a pretty good understanding of what had gone wrong but how was he going to repair the situation? Terry knew it would take a great deal of time. The problem took six weeks to create and would probably take a great deal longer to fix. (After all, once the trust between two co-workers is gone, it is very difficult to recapture.) Terry resolved:
* he would not do Steve's work. If Steve really needed help, he would show him how to do it once; watch Steve practice and then let Steve do it for himself.
* he would explain to Steve what was expected of him. Terry hoped this would promote greater communication between the two. Terry knew that he would also have to LISTEN to what Steve's concerns were too. (Terry knew that some would think that this type of discussion should be left up to the OLS, but Terry had to work with Steve day-in and day-out.)

Terry didn't know much about management or management techniques. He never really wanted to either. But here he was responsible for the motivation of a new employee and in the beginning he wasn't sure what to do. Now, Terry understood that Steve already was motivated and that his job was going to be to make sure that no barriers would get in his way. Whether he knew it or not, Terry's management technique was: MBGOOTW - Management By Getting Out Of The Way.

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