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Satisfied and Motivated

Lately, I have had two recent developments on my mind. First, I took interest in a current report by the Conference Board. For readers unfamiliar with that group, the Conference Board works in the public interest to produce and circulate management and marketplace knowledge to help businesses improve their performance and better serve society. The organization works as a global, independent, and non-profit source of information; and has for more than 90 years. Each year, the Conference Board commissions a survey of Americans' job satisfaction and this year's results aren't pretty.

Continuing a long-term trend, Americans of all ages and incomes expressed growing dissatisfaction with their work and workplaces. In fact, American workers have reached a 20 year low when it comes to their contentment at work. According to the Conference Board, we cannot blame the recession for this level of dissatisfaction; this year's results continue a decline in worker satisfaction that they have tracked since 1987, when they first began the survey. I found myself particularly alarmed that, according to the Conference Board, people under 25 years old find their work lives the least satisfying, and this group reports being unhappier than ever. We should see a serious problem here, as baby boomers stream toward the door and young people hate their jobs because they find them neither challenging nor meaningful. Considering the demographic make-up of most wildland fire agencies these days, the declining job satisfaction of young people represents a trend to which leaders and would-be leaders must pay careful attention.

I found interesting, the Conference Board's survey finding that people's satisfaction with their employer declined in all four areas that the Conference Board considers motivators of employee engagement. Those areas include job design, organizational health, managerial quality, and extrinsic awards. The declining satisfaction with extrinsic awards really caught my attention, because people's dissatisfaction with how their employer rewards their performance brings me to the other recent development that caught my attention.

In his newest book, *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, best-selling author Daniel Pink, challenges the system of rewards and

punishments that organizations and their supervisors have used to motivate people for decades. I haven't read Pink's book yet, but it is on my reading list. However, I've heard him interviewed several times now, read some reviews, and watched his presentation to the TEDGlobal 2009 conference. TED, by the way, is a small nonprofit organization devoting itself to ideas worth spreading, and their conferences at Oxford University bring together big thinkers from the worlds of technology, entertainment, and design. You can find Daniel Pink's presentation at TEDGlobal 2009 on the web.

Pink basically says that organizations continue to cling to outmoded ideas about motivating people's performance that no longer work or, at least, ones we have not adapted to the work of the modern organization. Using some pretty convincing science for support, Pink tells us that contingent rewards, the ones that say "Do this and you will get that" don't successfully motivate much of the work that people do in today's organizations. In fact, not only do those traditional contingent rewards not work anymore, they actually de-motivate many modern workers.

Why? Well, because today's workplace often requires an unlimited need for resourceful thinking; and far fewer simple tasks followed by rote. Efforts to establish doctrine in wildland fire organizations recognized this fact. Those efforts endeavored to create principles that enable and empower agency personnel to complete their work, encourage their use of sound judgment, take advantage of their training and experience, and support their decision-making. A doctrinal approach could look consistent with Pink's conclusion that organizations should motivate people by tapping their inner drive for autonomy and self-mastery.

To be clear, according to Pink, and the studies he cites for support, contingent awards still work. However, they motivate people performing relatively simple and repetitive tasks. So, if a leader wants to motivate firefighters to dig line from point A to point B and get it done fast, a promise of some tangible reward may motivate them to get the job done and get it done quickly. However, promising a carrot or threatening with a stick likely won't improve results when assigning someone to locate the best place for a helispot in challenging terrain, conduct an after-action-review, plan training, or become a leader. Pink's bottom line; contingent rewards work to motivate people performing uncomplicated and recurring tasks, but those kinds of tasks make up less and less of our work, and conditional rewards do not work well for creative and conceptual tasks. People performing creative or conceptual work find motivation from their drive for autonomy and self-direction.

The Conference Board's observations about job satisfaction and Daniel Pink's ideas about motivation come together powerfully. In today's

workplace, leaders must understand that without challenging, meaningful work, many people are just showing up to pull-down a pay check, and will come and go through a revolving door.

Effective leaders will pay serious attention to people's satisfaction, particularly if they want to attract a new generation of young workers to their organizations, keep them around, and prepare them to lead the organization. People need challenge and fulfillment from their work. Work in the nation's wildland fire service can provide both. Firefighters have long found satisfaction in the combination of hard work, risk, camaraderie, and service to both people and the land. Wildland fire service leaders can use those motivations, and others, to create and maintain a satisfying workplace where people willingly work and performance soars. Successful leaders will also attend to their own approaches to motivation. They will strive to inspire people by tapping into people's drives and motivations and recognize that the old standby carrot-and-stick approach to rewarding people does not work for much of what we do, or many of the people who do it, these days.

Biography

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