



# LET THEM EAT CAKE

## **ABSTRACT**

Imagine having all those brains thinking how to best fit what they do to their employer's needs, how best to delight the customer and reduce the cost of doing so

**Motivation Matters Limited**



## Introduction

I have contributed to several discussions on LinkedIn, a B2B online networking site. The LinkedIn groups relating to organization performance, staff engagement, management and leadership skills are at the centre of my professional interests.

A discussion asked for opinions on the best strategy to develop engaged staff. Opinions poured in on successful practices so I thought I would add mine.

My writing style, such as it is, is subtle and faintly ironic. My management style is one of pointing the way, not taking you blindfolded to the destination. I hope my words make you think and form your own questions rather than lay down a heavy tome of “facts”. I want to point you to learning.

If I have learnt one thing, in my scientific research of people’s behaviour at work and a third of century of honing that knowledge in management roles, it is that what is obvious is always more subtle and layered where people are concerned.

I pitched into the discussion and described a successful action that helped to build the momentum of behaviour change and add to the excitement that something different was happening.

## Reinforcement

The action I described was a small fifteen minute celebration of the first time the team had smashed through a daily target. The action was to buy a sponge cake and eat our thin slice during an afternoon break where I congratulated them on their achievement.

I was unprepared for the wrath of some of my LinkedIn colleagues.

## Criticism

Accusations flew: I was treating my people like fools: driving them to incredible performance with only a sponge cake as reward: my comeuppance was assured when people saw through my ploy.

Shocked at first, I rapidly became angry. How dare they think the people I managed were fools! Why is it that some people with degrees, doctorates, money or the right accent (leaving aside all the usual discriminatory bigotry) believe those without their special “quality” are inferior? Absolute nonsense.

When allowed, I speak of “the divine spark in a human being” and the need to treat people accordingly.

The reasons these people misconstrued my words are clear, they come from my experience and research of management.





## I remember you

Let me explain and make you think.

When you switch on your TV it goes back to the programme you were last watching, maybe some late night football or the latest big sport's frenzy. It has forgotten that you watched Coronation Street (a soap opera) five times last week. Yes I know TVs are getting intelligent now.

But when you ask someone to do a task they don't just remember the last task. They recall everything that has happened to them in work, in school, at home – the sum of their life's experiences. Their behaviour in the task depends on the sum of those experiences including, thankfully, the last time you asked.

People's lives are a journey. Not along a simple path but up a spiral staircase. As time goes on we come to the same point but higher relative to the ground. Each loop of the spiral gives us new experiences to add to our sum total which makes us see the ground from the same angle but with fresh insight.

It is this position, up the spiral staircase, that my accusers do not understand. Perhaps they have not had the experiences themselves and are looking at a 2D diagram in a book.

## 2D solutions to 3D problems

Much of the engagement industry seems to be shallow and two dimensional. No wonder it has a bad reputation among hard-nosed leaders. Mind you one of England's greatest leaders, Lord Nelson, was known to ensure his men were fed before he himself ate. I believe this same tradition is followed in the US Marines.

What is needed is a new psychological contract between the managed and the manager: a contract where each party promises to do their best for the other, in a business setting.

## The Barrier

There is a barrier to doing this: the barrier that is the sum of previous experiences. To get inside the barrier is a change management on an inter-personal level. The experiences you offer as proof of your new behaviour need to be coherent.

## Strategy

Perhaps a few words on my *strategy for engagement* are useful.

- ⊙ The change intervention needs to account for the spiral and adapt as we go through layer after layer.
- ⊙ Build trust between manager and managed through honesty.
- ⊙ Be prepared to be tested so be consistent.





- ⊙ Be present in people's lives. Recognise their successes and try to help with their failures.
- ⊙ Reinforce success.
- ⊙ Remove the constraints that prevent people achieving more.
- ⊙ Share the vision from the top. Not a 7% ROI but what the organization does for people.
- ⊙ Make people feel personally valued.
- ⊙ As performance soars share the monetary rewards but not as a performance related bonus.
- ⊙ Manage people cognisant of the divine spark within each of them.
- ⊙ Remember you lease people's behaviour so you have expectations.
- ⊙ Tell people what those expectations are.
- ⊙ Allow people to innovate do not stifle with reviews and committees.
- ⊙ Tell people what can be changed and what cannot without higher review.
- ⊙ Notice their innovation success or failure – it is all learning.
- ⊙ Don't worry about capacity; it equals process multiplied by effort. Watch it double when needed!

## Show trust

And the hardest part? If you have taught a child to ride a bike you know that they will only learn fully without stabilisers, without your steadying hand and without you shouting be careful. It is the same here. You have to learn to let go and worry silently from a distance. Jumping in with advice or a steadying hand shows you do not trust and soon the will to try evaporates as the person feels under-valued, not trusted.

Your job, the manager's new job, is to make sure the crash helmet fits properly, be ready with a bandage when called and, most importantly, recognise the effort, the success, and value the person for it.

Is it worth it? Imagine having all those brains thinking how they can best fit what they do to their employer's needs. How best to meet customers's needs, how best to delight customers and reduce the cost of doing so.

Plenty of research is now publically available about the financial impact of engaged staff.

Become the lowest cost highest value supplier – somebody is.

Why not you?





## MOTIVATION MATTERS LIMITED

### VISION

Inspiring good management, and thus achievement, within organizations will improve employee attitudes, engagement and job satisfaction to create stronger companies with more productive people.

More productive companies build competitive advantage creating a sustainable business with safe growth, healthy profits, secure well paid jobs and contribute to the well-being of the UK.

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