



Pearls of Leadership Wisdom: Secrets of Motivation

Welcome to my backyard and Pearls of Leadership Wisdom. This one I am calling “Secrets of Motivation.” During the last week a couple of stories have been running through my mind. On the surface, they seem unrelated, and yet they tell the story of a task that all of us as leaders have to do. It’s a job that we often overlook or misunderstand, but it is central to our roles as leaders.

Here is my first story. I was working with a woman who is a senior leader in a financial institution and she was telling me about her career history and things that had happened that had shaped her career. She had started in the human resources function. She became manager of staffing and was ultimately promoted to be a director of HR and became a generalist. And in her generalist role she supported a VP, a business leader of one of the divisions. She loved that job and thoroughly enjoyed working for him. So one day, he called her in at the close of the day and said, “By the way, the director of our Customer Call Center is leaving and I want you to apply for the job.” She was stunned. In fact, she went home that night and worried. She kept asking herself questions like “Am I doing something wrong in this job? Does he not think I am competent? Is there something he hasn’t been telling me?” Luckily, she took her questions the next morning to him. Now it was his turn to be stunned. And he said, “You know I have seen you for some time as someone who ultimately will become a senior leader of this institution. But I will tell you it won’t happen unless you have operating experience, unless you have a chance to run a P&L.” She took the job.

Story number two: Emmett was an African-American manager in a manufacturing organization in a plant. He recalls a conversation that he had with his boss’s boss, the VP of operations. It was a casual conversation, really about understanding customers and customer needs, and very informally, the VP of operations said to him, “So Emmett, it’s really important for you to get some experience getting to know our customers and getting close to them. Because when you have my job that will be such important experience and information for you to rely on.” Emmett was stunned. He said to me, “For the first time in my life, I realized I could have the potential to go beyond being a manager or a director or plant manager. It hadn’t occurred to me until then that that could be a possibility for me.”

Those two stories show the undeniable impact that a leader can have on awakening motivation. In my opinion, we spend way too much time trying to identify drive or find out whether someone is ambitious when we need to be doing more to awaken potential in others. Drive and motivation aren't static traits that you either have or don't have. The woman in our first story didn't raise her hand, but that doesn't mean she isn't driven. The gentleman in our second story did not see himself as a senior leader, but that is not a motivational flaw. Drive and ambition and dreams can be awakened. So what are you doing to awaken potential and motivation in others? What talent have you already maybe overlooked or might be right there in front of you in your organization just waiting to be recognized and awakened? Sometimes it is right there in front of us. And if you were lucky enough to have someone in your career who saw your potential, now would be a great time to say thank you.