

Dead Man Walking

“If you aren't fired with enthusiasm, you will be FIRED with enthusiasm.” – Vince Lombardi

With recent surveys indicating that up to 25% of the American work force stay in jobs because they can't afford to lose them, it's no wonder that it is challenging for leaders to generate passion for change.

Fear of losing pensions or healthcare coverage often keeps people stuck in jobs they hate. Far too many are hoping for an early retirement severance packages or old age—whichever comes first. So many settle; so few find their passion.

Early in my management experience, I had a conversation with an underperforming employee. It ended up teaching me a lot about the world of work. Does it in any way ring true to your experience?

“I don't even know whether what I am about to say to you is appropriate,” I confessed. “But it is honest. You don't even have to respond. I hope you do, but you may just decide to listen. Either way, I appreciate you coming in to talk with me.”

He said nothing, choosing only to stare at me from his seat on the other side of my desk.

“I’m frustrated,” I continued. “I know we have talked about your performance before. I also know you’re capable of doing the work. When I’m here, you do the work. When I’m not here, the work is not being completed. It’s not a question of ability, but of your choice to work up to your abilities.”

He chose not to comment as I paused.

“I’ve wracked my brain trying to come up with anything I could do to motivate you, and I’ve tried everything I know how to do,” I confessed. “I’m relatively new as a manager, so I finally realized that I could be the problem. I decided that maybe I needed to seek your advice. You’ve worked for many managers over the years. I’m sure you’ve had some that you loved working for. I’d like to know what they did as managers to help you stay excited about your work. I’m willing to learn from your experience and adjust how I deal with you. Are you aware of anything that I might do that could help?”

There was a long pause and no comment.

“OK, if it’s not me, then maybe it’s you,” I asserted. I paused before continuing. “You’ve been

doing this job for a long time. Maybe you no longer enjoy what you're doing."

"I love what I do," he said with minimal affect, finally breaking his silence.

"It doesn't show," I said calmly. "I need someone in this position who loves what he's doing and can work independently."

Silence returned.

"I don't want to belabor this. I just want you to consider something," I said softly. "There's no crime in not enjoying a job. The tragedy is that you stay in it. Life is too short to stay in a job you don't like. I don't want to fight you; I'd rather work with you. Think about what I've said. If this no longer is the job you would like to be in, because of me or for any other reason, then I'd rather work with you to help you find a job you can get excited about. In fact, as far as I'm concerned, use some of your time on the job to explore new options. I just need your help in either reengaging in this job or in freeing up a space so I can find someone who will."

"Are we done?" he asked. I let him go and decided that I had just engaged in another fruitless exercise in learning about management the hard way.

To my surprise, three weeks later he offered his resignation. There were no reasons given. He just let me know that he was leaving. I accepted with controlled reserve. Alone I was ecstatic.

I'm not proud of my response, but share it to give you an indication of the frustration that I and others on the team had been feeling. We had a going away party, and he was not even invited.

His leaving brought new opportunities. His replacement fit right in, and we were all amazed at the joy that returned to our team. Our productivity had always improved when he went on vacation; now his vacation was permanent.

I had all but forgotten him, when I received a call from his wife several months after his departure. I was concerned that she might have heard about the party. Her words quickly revealed that she had *the rest of the story*, and that it was well worth hearing.

"I wanted to call and thank you for what you said to my husband," she said with heartfelt sincerity. "I know my husband is not the type of man who will do that himself."

"I'm not sure what I am being thanked for," I confessed. I had said many things to her husband and had no idea what was worth being praised for.

"A few months ago, my husband came home from work, and he was upset," she continued. "He told me that you had told him that he didn't like his job. He was livid that you could say that after all the years he had served."

"Yes, I did say that," I replied. "I remember that conversation."

"He said that you had offered to help him find another job," she continued. "I listened, and then asked him what I don't think he was prepared to answer, 'Do you like your job?'"

He didn't respond, so I continued, "All you do is complain about it. Maybe your manager is right. He did say he would help you find another job. Why don't you take him up on your offer? I'm tired of all your complaining too."

"Oh, the second shot across his bow!" I cringed. "Did he get bit by his dog later on that night? That was one tough day!"

"No," she said, laughing. "No dog, but the cat didn't scratch him either."

"I'm sorry," I added. "I tend to get carried away. I've had those days too when people tell me things I don't want to hear. I'm just thankful for wives! They have a way of telling us men what we need to hear."

"He didn't seem to like what I said either," she confessed. "But the next day, on his own, he went to UCLA's Career Planning Center. They put him through a series of tests, helped him start putting his resume together, and encouraged him to explore various career options."

"He never told me," I said. "I think he called in sick that day, but no matter."

"Eventually he told me what he was doing, and I encouraged him," she continued. "He was nervous when he went on interviews, but he was so excited when he got his new job."

"I'm glad," I said. "I really meant what I said. I wanted him to find something he could get excited about. How's he doing?"

"He's doing wonderfully," she said with a smile in her voice. "He's happy, and I'm happy. That's why I called."

Sometimes you have to care enough to confront people. Are there people working for you who you're letting settle for a job they hate? *No dead men walking* need remain in jobs they detest!

Honest feedback given in a spirit of support can be the best message you can give as a leader. Don't expect your advice to be appreciated at the time, but some people need a push to find their potential and to renew their passion.

If you need a push yourself, consider this my conversation with you. Life is just too short to stay in a job you hate!

"You can buy a man's time; you can buy his physical presence at a given place; you can even buy a measured number of his skilled muscular motions per hour. But you can not buy enthusiasm...you can not buy loyalty...you can not buy the devotion of hearts, minds, and souls. You must earn these." – Clarence Francis