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What is in it for me?

A question that employees often pose, but one that leaders seldom answer..

— S.R. Raghunathan



Finding purpose in life: Organisations must encourage their people to want to come to work and provide them reason to do so.

T.T. Srinath

There is much talk among leaders these days about employee ownership, accountability and passion at work.

Leaders often feel that employees do not show enough passion, do not demonstrate ownership and are not accountable.

The common refrain we hear is, “People are just not committed.” Perhaps, there is some truth in this. Yet, why should an employee display ‘sterling’ qualities? What is in it for him or her? These are questions that are never answered.

Research, supported by psychology, has shown that every human being looks for personal gain, material or otherwise, for meaning and purpose when he has to commit himself.

Eliyahu Goldratt, the famous physicist and consultant, prescribes a simple model that explains employee motivation. The first question an employee will ask you, if he or she can, is “Why? What is in it for me?”

Employers must be able to direct them so that they recognise the ‘pot of gold’ at the end of the rainbow — but this alone is not enough. The employee would then ask, “What is the risk involved?” There is need to allay the employee's fears and mitigate the risk involved. Risk is something that can tire or cause anxiety. Thus, reduction of this is very important.

Then comes the question, “What is the employee running away from?” or, perhaps, running towards. Two conditions make one want to shift; avoidance of pain and pursuit of pleasure.

If an employee is suffering from pain, giving him a vitamin will not help. What he needs is a pain-killer. If an employee can be juiced up with attraction, give him or her cause to feel joyous.

As we live our lives, most of us seek to give it purpose. Scholars of yore have said “Have purpose, meaning will follow.” Everyday, when one wakes up he or she asks, “What does today mean? What will I get out of today?”

Thus, there is a constant search. If organisations can provide the answers, their employees will feel enthused to come to work and discover purpose and meaning.

How can organisations do this? The way forward is to help each employee recognise that ‘Life's longing to be lived' as Khalil Gibran says so beautifully in the Prophet.

Even a man with no roof over his head looks to the next with desire. I sometimes ask participants in my programme, “What is life's greatest gift to us?” The answers vary, but I have found that at least one person says, “ hope”; yes, that is life's greatest gift to us. All of us wake up to the new day with the hope that the day will be great. If this is what helps me get out of bed and move about with enthusiasm, should not organisations provide for generating this feeling?

Yes, they must encourage people to want to come to work and provide reason for them to do so.

A man was once walking down the road and he chanced upon a stone mason. He asked the mason “What are you doing?” The mason replied rudely, “Can you not see? I am breaking stones.” The man moved on.

In the next street he encountered another stone mason working on some stones. The man asked again, “What are you doing?” The mason said, “I am dressing stones and I hope my stones will be used to build a temple.”

The act of both the stone masons was the same, yet one felt he was breaking, and the other, that he was dressing stones in the hope that they would find use. Such is a life with hope. If you believe, you will look for meaning.

Several years ago a large automobile major videographed employees working on an assembly line then panned the camera to the end purpose of their effort. When the recording was played back, the employees realised how their jobs were impacting the end-product. This brought back passion as every employee on the assembly line saw his task as having purpose.

Thus, what is required is for organisations to build into their education what the employees' contribution means.

There are several ways this can be thought through. Perhaps, it is time for organisations to appoint a ‘Chief Belief Officer' as the Futures Group has done — one who believes in people and helps find ways to give them reason to own the organisation.

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