

The Unintended Consequences of an 'Appreciative' Dialog

By Carl F. Hicks

Carl's Perspective

As a newly hired manager with ten direct reports, I thought it best to get to know each person and their respective job responsibilities early on. Most of these employees had worked together for at least one year; some had been employed for ten years or more. At age twenty-nine I was the newcomer. By my second week on the job, I started making it a point to visit briefly with each person once a week to provide positive and specific feedback. On Friday afternoons when I was in town, I always made a point to visit with Mrs. Orr, our budgeting and finance specialist. Approaching my sixth week on the job, Mrs. Orr had prepared a great analysis that was successfully used to justify three new positions. The Vice President was impressed with the analysis and I assured him that it was the work of Mrs. Orr. That very day I was scheduled to have an appreciative dialog with her.

After sharing my appreciation with Mrs. Orr, she asked me if I was still interested in hearing ideas on how to improve employee productivity. I assured her I was. She then informed me that she could improve her personal productivity by 20% if I would eliminate my Friday dialogs with her. Aghast, I asked why. She informed me that she was a professional, knew when she had done a job or task well and did not need me to bring it to her attention. Furthermore, she considered my weekly appreciative dialogs with her unnecessary and a waste of her valuable time. Unable to think of anything else to say, I thanked her for her feedback and left for my office.

Mrs. Orr's perspective

Mrs. Orr, I later found out, had always been easily embarrassed by praise. She struggled with compliments paid to her. Her formative years involved a strict upbringing where the focus was on not making mistakes. She learned that lesson well and adopted a belief system that "no news was indeed good news." She simply did not know how to handle my appreciative dialog process. The thought of my stopping by each Friday was stressful for her. Later she told me that she dreaded coming to work on Friday if she knew I was in town. So, all day on Friday she would be nervous and ill at ease. In essence, I was ruining her life.

Lessons learned

Mrs. Orr taught me a valuable life lesson. My efforts to provide positive feedback and recognition were based on my needs for recognition rather than on hers. I was trying to interact with Mrs. Orr using a method that worked for me. My leadership imperative was to bring out the best in her while helping her to understand, embrace, pursue and achieve worthwhile initiatives. I clearly failed in that regard.

Instead of creating an environment that brought out her best, I created an environment (at least on Fridays) that worked to demotivate her. Monday through Thursday she was an engaged and productive employee.

On Fridays, however, she was anxious, tense, less engaged and certainly not productive, at least, according to her standards.

I failed to understand Mrs. Orr's *motivational drivers*. My awareness of her needs was woefully inadequate, and my perspective on how to effectively interact with her was out of focus. By interacting with her based primarily on my perspective and my needs, I caused a very good employee (and person) unnecessary stress, diminished her engagement with her job, negatively impacted her enjoyment of her job, and caused her to be less productive.

Interacting with her based on her needs not mine, enabled her to utilize her unique abilities and flourish. She was happy, less stressed, and able to thrive as an actively engaged employee. In short, she was at her best, and the organization, her coworkers, and I were the beneficiaries of her performance.

I am grateful to Mrs. Orr for this most valuable life lesson. She helped me see that even a well-meaning interaction from a manager can have a negative impact on an employee's attitude, level of engagement, and performance. She helped me to become aware that I should have embraced the "Platinum Rule," namely, treating others as they want to be treated! Once I understood and absorbed this lesson, Mrs. Orr and I went on to enjoy a great working relationship that lasted another six years.

How to Avoid My Mistakes

Fortunately, you don't have to make the mistakes I made with Mrs. Orr. The Growth Group, LLC, working in conjunction with Birkman International, has created the **Understanding My Motivational Drivers™** report that takes the guesswork out of what motivates another person.

The process is quick and easy. **The Understanding My Motivational Drivers™** report is derived from three questionnaires that are available on-line and take less than 45 minutes to complete. The report is then generated based on the responses provided and delivered via email.

The **Understanding My Motivational Drivers™** Report allows the participant to review, confirm, share and discuss with others the following key areas:

- How to work with me
- How to talk to me
- Biggest mistakes you can make with me
- How to incentivize me
- Motivating me for best performance

Learn how to bring out the best in others! Visit www.MyMotivationalDrivers.com today for more information and to download a sample report.



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