Say "Yes" to Reverse Employee Apathy
By MILTON MATTOX, PhD

Reversing employee apathy is an important goal for managers and leaders alike. Many managers yearn to keep their employees satisfied on the job and this goal is sometimes difficult to achieve. Like job satisfaction, employee apathy is a multidimensional concept that encompasses how employees feel about work, co-workers, managers, their department, the company's product, and of course pay for services rendered. There are several ways to address employee apathy. One simple, yet powerful, way has to do with how managers respond to suggestions made and questions asked by their team members.

A few years ago while I was working at a high tech company in the Silicon Valley, members of my software development department had some concerns about their work environment, culture and their overall value to the company as perceived by the organization. At the time, corporate America was increasing its attention on the bottom-line, manifesting in the form of "right-sizing" and outsourcing. The team had increasing concerns about job security and the uncertainty of their work environment. Their attitudes toward these and many similar factors were negatively impacting their overall job satisfaction.

My fellow managers and I worked hard to improve job satisfaction by increasing the number of fun team events and outings where the budget allowed. However, even these did not help as much as we would have preferred. Eventually, the attitude of the team went from one of job dissatisfaction to one of apathy, which is worse because many of them stopped caring about what we were trying to achieve as an organization. I have found that one good way to help reverse employee apathy where it exists is through the manager "learning to say yes" to requests and suggestions by the team, especially where there are no negative budgetary impacts.

For instance, have you ever conveyed an idea to your manager only to have him or her dismiss your idea without fully understanding it? Maybe you were in a group or departmental meeting with your manager and peers, and many great ideas were raised by all about a particular issue. The manager acknowledged that the ideas were good, but the one idea that was selected was one that he or she suggested. If these situations made you feel less valued, then imagine how your own employees feel when you say no. In my career, I have found that managers tend to say no much more often than they say yes to employee suggestions primarily for budgetary reasons, whether perceived or real.

The concern over budgetary constraints is absolutely valid, but not all suggestions require additional funding in order to be implemented. Managers have an opportunity to demonstrate to their team members that they actually hear their suggestions and take them to heart by finding creative ways to implement suggestions without negatively impacting the budget. Many times employee suggestions do not require an expensive solution. For example, a few years ago one of my team members suggested that it would be great if we could do more team building activities to get to know each other better. I knew that these particular team members were all avid science fiction movie fans so we decided to attend the opening of a huge science fiction movie after work. Each person paid for his or her own ticket which wasn't really too expensive, and it gave us the opportunity to do something as a group, which was really the main goal. My team members and I talked about our positive experience for days after the movie. We even ended up renaming the conference rooms in our area of the office building after key characters from the movie.

Many managers believe that their departmental members do not fully understand the repercussions of some of their formal and informal suggestions, and therefore the suggestions are politely (or not so politely) turned down. I have found that this situation occurs usually when there is poor, or a complete lack of good communication between the manager and the team members. Managers and team members should ensure that they are communicating well; however, the onus is on the manager to ensure that policies and procedures are well understood. For example, sharing how the budget process works was very beneficial in helping my team members understand exactly what budget challenges we faced. Once the budget was approved for a given period, I scheduled a meeting with the team and provided an overview of what our budget was for the year. I reviewed the budget once a month at a minimum as part of my budget review and management process and then reviewed the budget with the team at least once a quarter so that they could see how our actual spending compared to the approved budget. Once team members
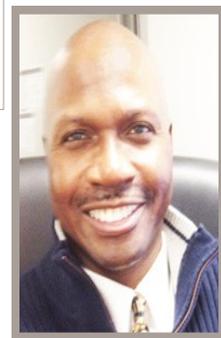
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understood how the budget process worked and more importantly, how we were doing as far as actual expenses incurred compared to what was budgeted, the team tended to help me find creative, low to no cost, ways to implement some of their suggestions. Without explaining how the budgeting process worked and a regular review of how we managed actual expenses, telling my team members that we didn't have the budget to implement some of their suggestions tended to sound like just another convenient excuse.

I have found that employees become disenchanted with the direction of the department simply because they are not allowed to contribute to its direction. This is usually the start of job dissatisfaction within the department or – even worse – employee apathy. Managers can help remedy this situation by occasionally saying yes to employee suggestions where viable. When the manager says yes to some of the employee's suggestions, the following occurs:

• Employees are pleasantly surprised that their suggestion was not only heard, but accepted.

• Employees tend to believe that they are contributing to the direction of the department.

• The manager and employee start to build trust between them, as the manager exhibits more support for the employees' suggestions

• Employees start to feel as though they are equal participants within the department and the manager is viewed more as a trusted advisor or coach.

• Employees tend to work harder towards achieving the goals of the department because they are actively participating in setting departmental goals.

• If the suggestion is truly not a good one, employees have a better understanding of why this is the case, because it was tried or at the very least the manager explained why the suggestion was not accepted.

On one occasion, I found that a team member's suggestion did not appear to be a good one to me but I implemented it anyway because it did not take much time and it did not negatively impact the budget. Later, I discovered that the suggestion actually saved the department some money. I would not have known this if I had just said no.

Managers are much more likely to squelch employee apathy by occasionally saying yes to staff ideas and suggestions. I have found that my staff is much more committed to the success of the department because they

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honest in all things. Saying "I don't know" is being honest when you don't know. A few people might respect your honesty, but the majority of people aren't probably used to someone telling the truth, sadly as that may seem. In many situations, when you tell the truth, people will respond more positively than you may think. Apologizing and listening are powerful characteristics.

If you don't know the answer to something, you could use the honest approach and promise the person or people that you will return with the answer. You could defer a difficult topic to an expert rather than risk commenting on your own. You could answer a question with another question, or even give a parallel answer on what you do know, which satisfies the asker's curiosity but avoids strong commitment.

If you would like more knowledge on how to cope with difficult situations, problematic people and other work-related problems, then order Accountability Coaching's training course. This educational course will teach you everything you need to be successful in life and to avoid problems along the way.

Another solution might be if you have difficult clients or prospects is to choose not to work with them; therefore, never needing to learn how to deal with these kind of people. Think about this for a minute. You probably don't have difficult friends – if people you know are difficult, they probably aren't your friends or aren't your friends for long. How much better would your life be without people in it who are difficult?

Brian Tracy talks about the first time you think about firing someone, you should. How much better would it be to shorten the time to try and deal with someone who is difficult and make the situation better, when it may never be? What else could you do with your time that would be a better use of it than to deal with difficult people?

How much better would your life be if there were no difficult people or very few difficult people in it? How would you feel? Consider what would have to happen to create this in your life, if you like the idea. No more negative emotions when that 'difficult' person calls or comes by the office for an appointment. No more complaining employees when they have to deal with a 'difficult' person. No more taking on people like this who later you wish you never did. I'm starting to feel better just thinking about no more 'difficult' people in my life any more, are you?