

Motivating Staff Members Using Everyday Symbols

By Dianne Durante

Looking for a unique, inexpensive way to make your staff meetings lighthearted and productive? Consider using simple everyday symbols to motivate and inspire your employees. Research demonstrates that when you make even small changes in the workplace environment – the Hawthorne Effect – big changes may appear as well. Why not try these motivational techniques; you will be pleased with the insights gained for organizational success.

Once the meeting is ready to begin, hand everyone three common objects found in every work setting: **a penny, an elastic band, and a pencil with an eraser**. Let them know they'll be having fun with these items by brainstorming their significance in day-to-to-day life, particularly relative to their job. Once you've begun this brainstorming process, you will be amazed at the possibilities these everyday symbols generate and how they will help to uncover and resolve the issues your organization most needs to address. Applaud employees as they share ideas and insights. Then build upon their ideas by reinforcing effective positive approaches to workplace success.

The Penny: Ask your staff, "What do you think of when you see a penny?" One of the most common answers to this question is, "A penny for your thoughts." Effective communication is the foundation for any successful endeavor. Challenge your employees to say one positive comment a day to at least five different coworkers. Remind them that communication has two parts: it's not just about saying nice things to others. We also need to listen. We have two ears and one mouth. We need to use them in that ratio. When we rearrange the letters in the word listen we get the word silent. So be silent, LISTEN. Repeat what the other person said, affirming their ideas in a caring and courteous manner. This will indicate our willingness to learn from others.

An employee might also respond, "A penny has two sides." In any conflict or problem-solving situation, we can best brainstorm with colleagues by looking at all sides of the issue. Minds are like parachutes; they only function when opened. Be open-minded. If we come to an impasse with a colleague, agree to disagree. This makes for a cooperative, win-win work environment.

You might also hear, "A penny is a useless commodity. I never even bother to pick one up." Yes, it seems like pennies are worthless, easily discarded, and outdated. Yet they still have value when we patiently collect them and put many together — a good metaphor for teamwork in the workplace. Sometimes we feel worn out, tired, worthless. But when we work together as a team, our energy and value increase. We encourage each other. In an effective work environment, small, seemingly insignificant things can make a big difference. Notice the little things.

A staff member might mention, "See a penny, and pick it up, all the day you'll have good luck." But in business it's more than luck; it's positive mental attitude. Try this positive-attitude rule for the organization's suggestion box. Every time staff members make a suggestion, they also need to applaud one great thing about their job. As managers, we need to do the same thing — acknowledge the positive before we address what needs to be changed.

Elastic Band: Now, hold up the elastic band and ask, "What can the elastic band signify for workplace success?" An elastic band stretches just like we do everyday in our jobs. Even when something is unfamiliar to us, it's amazing what can be accomplished when we take a risk and try something new.

Also, when we stretch an elastic band, it bounces back. This reminds us of our resiliency and our ability to bounce back from difficulties and challenges on the job. So maybe we had a bad day; tomorrow is another day. Encourage each other's resilient nature.

The elastic band also reminds us that we can stretch ourselves only so far, that we all have breaking points. It's important to realize how far we can stretch and what our breaking point is. A good, supportive environment will insure that every member of the team is stretching to his or her maximum without snapping.

Pencil: A pencil was one of the first basic tools in the workplace. Although low-tech, it still is a highly effective tool. Suggest that when your staff is stuck while working on the computer, they stop, pick up a pencil, and write. This often will unblock us because the act of writing with a pencil in hand creates a more emotional connection with the brain than does typing on a computer. Also, when we're feeling extreme frustration, we can use the pencil to release anger by grabbing it with two hands and breaking it in half. Our emotions will no longer block us, and we can still use that pencil once it is resharpened!

All organizations are masters at "To Do" lists. Encourage employees to also create "I Did" lists. Let the pencil be a reminder of daily accomplishments rather than focusing on all that still needs to be done.

The handy eraser on the end of the pencil reminds us that we all make mistakes. Acknowledge the mistake and make adjustments. Remember that Thomas Edison never viewed his mistakes as failures but rather saw them as stepping stones on the road to success.

At the end of the staff meeting, encourage employees to take the penny, elastic band, and pencil back to their desks as simple reminders of the importance of: talking as well as listening, looking at both sides of an issue, being good team players, stretching themselves, being resilient, writing to unblock themselves, creating an "I Did" list, and remembering that everyone makes mistakes.

Bravo! Applaud yourself for being such a good role model, taking a risk, and trying something new to motivate employees. May you find many other ways to use these and other everyday items as you inspire employees to be aware of the small, seemingly insignificant things that continue to make big differences in our personal and professional lives.