

CHAPTER ONE

WHAT MAKES FEDERAL EMPLOYEES TICK?

Understanding why federal employees act the way they do is the foundation for everything you do as a federal supervisor. You don't have to be a psychologist, but you do need some insight into why federal employees perform. Supervising federal employees is different from supervising private sector employees for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is why people go into the jobs they do. In this chapter, let's talk about motivation, job satisfaction, and happiness and how you apply those principles to the federal work site. Let's start by looking at why people work.

Why People Work

All the empirical data on the subject supports two important principles about people on the job: (1) the overwhelming majority of people want to work, and (2) they want to do it well.

People Want to Work

People want to work. Work is where you validate your worth as a human being; work is where you forge your strongest relationships; work is where you find mates; work is where you achieve most of what is important in life. As Studs Terkel said about work, "It is about a search, too, for daily meaning as well as daily bread, for recognition as well as cash, for astonishment rather than torpor, in short, for a sort of life rather than a Monday through Friday sort of dying."

Larry King was interviewing Patty Hearst recently and she was describing all the projects she was involved in—acting, writing, producing. Larry King contemptuously asked her why, with all the money that Granddad William Randolph Hearst left, why she wasn't spending her time watching soap operas and going to the market. She looked at him in a naïve yet astonished way, wrinkled her face, and said, "why would *anybody* not want to work?" She kept shaking her head and elaborating on the theme, all the time glancing at Larry King with a surprised look on her face as though to say, "how could you ask such a stupid question?"

No less an authority than "The Boss" himself, Bruce Springsteen, was talking about this in an interview with *Rolling Stone*:

I never knew anybody who was unhappy with their job and was happy with their life. It's your sense of purpose. Now some people can find it elsewhere. Some people can work a job and find it some place else but I don't know if that's lasting. But people do find ways . . . Or else they join the Ku Klux Klan or something. That's where it can take you.

To be sure, there are some who don't want to work. Interestingly, all the reliable studies show the same rough figures—about four in five people have a strong inner drive to work. For example, a recent poll of AARP members found that 84% of the members said that they would work even if they didn't need the money. Significantly, AARP includes people 50 years old and older, so we're not just talking about the so-called "greatest generation" of the Depression/World War II veterans, but also about the Baby Boomers like me who grew up in the '60s, and everything that entails.

A study by the Confederation of British Industry, the equivalent of the American Chamber of Commerce, found that 80% of people surveyed said if they won the lottery, they would return to work. Don't laugh. A local news station in Sacramento did a piece in 2004 about an 84-year old postal worker who was still schlepping mail because he enjoyed meeting people, even though he had—catch this—won the California lottery *twice*.

One of the best studies of why people work focused on the American work ethic. Daniel Yankelovich, the *Time* magazine pollster, and John Immerwahr of Villanova completed a comprehensive study of American

workers that reached a surprising conclusion: the work ethic is alive and well in America. They polled a cross section of American workers in all different types of jobs and occupations, blue collar and white collar, to examine their motivation and attitude toward their jobs during a time when the prevailing wisdom was that Americans had lost their work ethic and were being whipped by Japanese, who started off the day jumping up on their desks and shrieking, "Banzai!" Yankelovich, Daniel and John Immerwahr, *Putting the Work Ethic to Work* (Harcourt Brace 1982).

Yankelovich and Immerwahr found otherwise. Americans, they concluded, were just as devoted to the work ethic as anybody else. The responses showed a strong dedication to work values throughout the United States that matched or surpassed those of other industrialized countries—including Japan. The problem was not that Americans lacked work ethic, but that American management had not successfully tapped into it.

Workers Want to Perform Well

People who want to work, want to do it well. One of the interesting questions in the Yankelovich/Immerwahr study cited here, again asked of a huge cross-section of American workers, was:

Agree or Disagree: I would rather work for a supervisor who *demand*ed high-quality work [emphasis added].

Before I give you the answer, take a guess: what percentage of American workers do you think agreed with the statement? 30%? 40? 50? 60? Higher? The answer: 81%. I was stunned when I first saw it because, go back and look at the question—they'd *rather* work for a supervisor who *demand*ed, not merely suggested or encouraged, high-quality work.

This is good news for federal managers because it means that people would rather work in a high-performing environment than a low-achieving one. A lot of you may have suspected that intuitively, but the empirical data from the Yankelovich/Immerwahr study and others confirms it. Employees want to do work they can be proud of; they want to work in an organization with high standards of performance and behavior; they want to be challenged.

They don't want to work in a place with low standards where nobody cares one way or another whether anything gets done well or even whether it gets done at all. However, there are always some people, a minority, who do not want to work in a high-performing environment—19% according to the Yankelovich/Immerwahr study. Those people—the one out of five—are usually the most vocal, so we tend to be distracted and misled into backing down from setting high standards. However, the overwhelming majority, who always include your best people, will be attracted to and remain in an organization that sets high standards.

Therefore, the Job Itself Attracts Employees

The significance of these two principles is that the inherent qualities of the job attract, retain, and motivate people. Therefore, the foundation for all your efforts to motivate your employees must center on the job itself. You hear a lot these days about "Gen X," or other labels used to stereotype people from different generations in the workforce, most of which are based on the premise that people are different now so what attracted and motivated people 20, 30, or 100 years ago simply does not apply anymore. I was reading a federal manual on alternative work schedules that touts them as being necessary because, "people are different today." The manual goes on to explain how people just aren't interested in working anymore; therefore, it erroneously concludes that managers must try to attract and retain employees by creating programs to make it easier for them to escape the job and its responsibilities.

The agency writing the manual should know better. Human nature is no different now than it has been for millennia. What draws employees to jobs, what keeps them in those jobs, and what makes them work hard is the nature of the work itself, not the benefits, working conditions, flexible hours, and all the other features that many federal agencies are touting.

The key to attracting, retaining, and motivating people is strengthening the jobs, giving them more responsibility, holding them to higher standards, challenging them, teaching them new skills, letting them make important decisions, and focusing on other job-enhancing characteristics.