



Chapter 9

## GOOD PEOPLE ARE EVERYTHING; MONEY ISN'T

*You can buy a person's hands but you can't  
buy his heart. His heart is where  
his enthusiasm is, his loyalty is.*

Stephen Covey

The idea came to me seven years ago, but I remember as if it were yesterday the mental conflict that came with it. I was the young president of a relatively new firm with the uncommon idea to reward good work with no work at all. As my valuable vice president's first five-year mark approached, I wondered if it wouldn't be wise to preempt any burnout by giving her paid leave—a sabbatical—then making that five-year reward standard company policy.

The dissenter in my head ended every sentence with a question mark. Could a company of eight or ten people afford in workload alone to give up a key person, even for a

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few weeks? What about clients who relied on her service and counsel? What if, during her time away, she decided to change companies or careers? What if more and more employees began to qualify? (I now believe one of the indicators of the strength of our firm is how many people have taken sabbaticals.) What then? Few companies offer that kind of time off—maybe for good reason.

I told myself that the risks of underwriting a sabbatical fall far below the risk of a valued employee feeling wrung out and unappreciated. Furthermore, if one person's absence can jeopardize an entire operation, we had bigger problems than time off. I also thought of the pleasure of telling a faithful worker to wrap up five years of effort by refueling her personal interests, then coming back to us. Someone who found herself renewed after the first five years, I reasoned, was more likely to stay a second five.

So with some fanfare, I introduced The DeMoss Group sabbatical. After five years of service, any employee of any rank (companies that offer sabbaticals typically limit them to executives) was entitled to four consecutive weeks of paid leave—with the option to attach another week of regular vacation. We also would reimburse up to \$2,500 in travel expenses.

To show that The DeMoss Group meant business, anyone on sabbatical would be fully extracted from all firm work. No checking e-mail or voice mail. No calls, for any reason, from fellow employees. There would be no business or professional

requirement, such as reading or taking an educational course. In return, I asked only that the person taking a sabbatical commit to spend at least one more year with us.

Beth used her time away that year to hike the north coast of Maine, visit family and friends in North Carolina and Virginia, and spend time doing nothing at all. Meanwhile, I confess that until she walked back in the front door—our first experiment in this perk—I hadn't realized that I could hold my breath for five weeks. During that time, we didn't speak once. To my delight, the wheels of the firm rolled on as the team deftly covered Beth's client work (realizing others would do the same for them when their sabbatical rolled around).

Just as sweet was Beth's summary statement on her weeks away: "The timing was impeccable, you'll never know," she said, blowing in these days with fresh winds and new energy. She thanked me as if I'd known all along that like a car stuck in stop-and-go city traffic, after five years a person needs to flush the buildup in her mental engine. In truth, little information exists for or against business sabbaticals. Logic alone says that loyalty runs two ways—an employee who gives her best deserves my best in return. Then, too, as Einstein once said, a person doesn't so much need rest as variety.

Since Beth's policy-pioneering trip to northern Maine, seven people in our small company have earned and taken sabbaticals. One spent five weeks exploring Australia, having planned out only one week of his trip prior to boarding his

plane for Down Under. Beth also qualified for her second sabbatical, a landmark award that came up when the five-year sabbatical began to help produce ten-year veterans. The ten-year mark awards six weeks of paid leave, a \$10,000 bonus, and a weeklong, all-expenses-paid trip for two to any Ritz-Carlton hotel or resort in America.

Now, what you're reading here makes sense only if you're also reading between the lines. The implication is that in business, how you treat your people trumps what you do with your clients, schedules, output, and spreadsheets. Happy people affect everything else. You might also read between the lines, in all caps, that a company's policy has to be more than talk.

To the growing list of increasingly anemic business phrases like "committed to excellence" and "quality counts"—phrases that headline corporate brochures without figuring into company policy—I would add, "People are our best assets." Statistically, only half of working Americans are satisfied with their jobs. Among the satisfied 50 percent, only 14 percent are "very satisfied." Dig a little further and see that 40 percent of all America's workers feel disconnected from their employers; two-thirds come to work with scant motivation to help achieve their employers' business goals or objectives; 25 percent admit to showing up just to collect a paycheck.

My own journey from an essentially autonomous PR consultant to the head of a firm has been a stairway of very human insights. Chief among them is that without good

people—trusted, professional, respected, motivated, inspired, rested people—I have no firm. Early on I resolved to attract first-rate employees and keep them as long as possible, a simple concept in which money factors less than some might think. To illustrate, once when a great employee left us to move back to his favorite state, a client urged me to offer him more money to stay. The client's suggestion was a compliment and a strong vote of confidence, but I knew better; personal decisions ultimately have no price.

On that note, though The DeMoss Group pays competitively, some of our employees willingly left higher-paying jobs to join us. And though every person's decision has its own intangibles, I believe a choice of where to work traces to four essential motivators.

The first motivator is mission. Communications professionals wanting to use their skills to advance the work of faith-based organizations and causes will love it here. All honest work glorifies God, that's a given. Some of our employees, for their part, wearied of promoting grocery store grand openings and hotel conference facilities—work done in previous public relations jobs. They wanted their skills to more directly support Christian organizations and causes, and that is what The DeMoss Group is in business to do. In the hierarchy of a company's reason for being, a day with The DeMoss Group is more than a job description with a dollar sign; it's a mission to do Something that Matters.

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The second motivator is a good leader. Not necessarily the smartest or brightest—or I'd have more trouble attracting employees—but a leader fixed on mission and committed to the people who help pursue it. In my desire to weigh my company's every move in terms of its effect on all employees, I pay myself less money now than when our firm was half its current size. I've learned firsthand that people have an easier time serving a leader who is wholeheartedly serving them.

Third is corporate culture, and every company has one: that unwritten code of work environment, people chemistry, traditions, and management style—even dress code (casual dress is almost always acceptable here; and, no, our work has not suffered)—and whether it forces the employee to defend his turf or frees him to help the entire group gain new ground.

We deliberately work in a class-A office park with a view from our fifth-floor offices that, on a clear day, stretches twenty miles to historic Stone Mountain. Why not save money in a single-story commercial office complex? The answer is that all of us, collectively, are willing to shave profit-sharing for work space that takes in beauty. We also value the annual fall retreat for all staff and spouses, prayer and Bible study every Monday morning, snacks and drinks in our café and our “quiet room” with massage chairs and noise-cancelling headphones.

The DeMoss Group culture's warp and woof is collaboration and teamwork. We preach and practice open-door management. We jointly commemorate victories and console

one another on anything that falls short. When conflicts arise, which is seldom, the underlying assumption is each person's value. The word that echoes back to us over the years is that even those who have left our firm attest to its rare corporate culture.

I said that money is less a motivator than some might imagine, and though it cannot match mission, leadership, and culture, it definitely factors. The fourth motivator is compensation/benefits: salary, health insurance, retirement plans, vacation schedules, and other perks. The majority of our competitive benefits took shape in an employee committee of which neither I nor any vice president was a member. Our employees are satisfied with our menu-style benefits program because they designed it. They also participate in a profit-sharing pool each year, a tangible reward for hard work, good attitude and solid results for our clients.

The *Gallup Management Journal* recently ran a study that placed The DeMoss Group in a small minority (27 percent) of American workplaces whose employees are "engaged," that is, passionately and profoundly connected. My reaction to that news is less pride in our circumstances than a sense of tragedy for the majority of Americans unable to associate eight-plus hours of work a day with personal meaning, much less joy.

In another recent ranking, our employees' responses placed us eighth in the *Atlanta Business Chronicle's* survey of

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Atlanta's A+ Employers (under one hundred employees). The Best Christian Workplaces Institute ranked us first the past two years among products and services companies with fewer than ninety employees, a survey in conjunction with *Christianity Today* magazine and the Christian Management Association. Other firms, even clients, frequently come to us with questions about our sabbatical program and our corporate culture.

If I had to distill it to an epigram, I'd say that in business, a leader does well to think less about being great and brilliant than being good and appreciative. MBAs, management consultants, and conferences all potentially have great lessons for us. But the best business case study, for me, on how to keep good employees, started with my nerve-racking decision to send my best people out the front door for a while. The point is that I had to make it about them and not me because good people aren't just the main thing around here, they are *everything*.