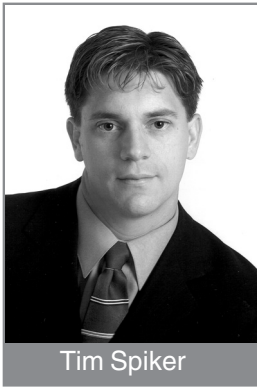


Going Below the Surface

By *Tim Spiker*



Tim Spiker

FMI Corporation

5171 Glenwood Avenue
Suite 200
Raleigh, NC 27622
Tel: 919.787.8400
Fax: 919.785.9320

55 Madison Street
Suite 410
Denver, CO 80206
Tel: 303.377.4740
Fax: 303.377.3535

5301 West Cypress
Suite 201
Tampa, FL 33607
Tel: 813.636.1364
Fax: 813.636.9601

www.fminet.com

Many of us as leaders have felt the challenge of not being able to motivate those whom we lead. We've looked at the next generation of leaders coming up and seen an entire group of people whom we don't really understand. We've taken them to lunch, made a special effort to talk to them at the company Christmas party, and even memorized the names of their children and spouse, but still feel inept when it comes to tapping into what motivates and inspires them. Perhaps they're simply not the type of employee can be motivated. Perhaps they can be motivated and inspired and we as leaders simply aren't asking the right questions.

Last month's FMI leadership e-newsletter survey revealed that only 45% of those who responded to the survey agreed that their leaders "purposely sought to know what motivates, inspires, and excites me in life and work." You have a significant opportunity to separate yourself from other leaders by simply seeking to know what motivates and inspires your followers. While there are general principles to keep in mind when seeking to motivate someone, there is nothing more powerful than getting to know them personally and what uniquely motivates them. Knowing your people deeply is perhaps the most critical aspect of your ability as a leader to motivate and inspire your followers.

So what is there to know about your employees? A lot. What questions you ask in the process of getting to know them is important. Many leaders will start getting to know their people individually by investigating the personal lives of their employees over a meal or two. While this is not in and of itself a bad idea, it can, without trust, be interpreted as manipulative or insincere. It is far more effective for leaders to engage with their followers in personal discussions regarding work first in order to establish trust. And there are a number of important questions you as a leader can engage with your followers about to get to know them personally. Every leader should know the following about their followers:

- Past
- Pain
- Pleasure
- Potential
- Plans



Past

The history of your followers can often times give subtle and not-so-subtle clues as to what motivates and inspires them. What do you know about your followers' history? What path has brought them to be under your leadership? What brought them to your organization? What types of organizations and roles have they had throughout their career? What have been the most shaping moments they've had in their careers previously?

The idea in investigating someone's past with them is not be the sleuth with an agenda. Rather, it is just to discuss with them what has moved them in their career to this point. It is a discussion, however, that needs to go beyond dates, locations, past company names and roles. It is one that should be peppered with comments like 'Tell me more about that' or 'Could you explain further why that was an important to you?'

Pain

Everyone who has worked for more than 6 months has had some pain in their careers. They've been wronged by a co-worker, disappointed by a leader, passed over for a promotion, or even lied to by a subordinate. While we've all had disappointments in our careers, certainly some have been more significant than others based on our circumstances at the time and the perceived magnitude of the event. I recently had a friend ask me "What are the three worst things that have happened to you in the past two and half years?" It was a question that caused me to think and my answers revealed a great deal about what is important to me. Only a slight adjustment on that question takes it from being a personal question to a work question: "What are the three worst things that have happened to you in your career?"

Imagine the insight that can be gleaned from an honest answer to such a question. Understanding the pain of those whom we are leading provides evidence of what is important to them and how we might be able to motivate and inspire them in the future.

Pleasure

The flip side of investigating what has brought career-related pain to those we are leading is inquisition into what has brought them pleasure. When have your followers felt most satisfied in their work? Who was the best leader they've ever worked for and what did that leader do that was so important to you? When in their careers have they been most excited about getting up in the morning and coming to work? What would you add or delete from your work to make this job sheer joy? What is the biggest contribution they've ever made to a project or organization?

As you hear the answers to these questions, pay attention to the energy that reveals itself. Even introverted followers light up when sharing answers to these types of questions... though as introverts, they may want the questions ahead of time in order to prepare for your questions. Nonetheless, understanding the pleasure of your followers will give clear clues on what motivates them.

Potential and Plans

What do you see as your potential as a leader? What are you hoping for next week, next month, and next year? What is your definition of success?

While you ponder these answers, think about how important it would be to know the answers each of your people would give to these questions. Knowing how your followers view their future is critical if you are to become a world-class motivator.

One word of caution when discussing the future plans of those whom you are leading: few conversations regarding future plans are truly honest. Leaders ask questions about ambition and the next promotion and employees often feel obligated to toe the party line with an answer that would imply a lifetime of devoted service to the company was on the horizon. Do everything you can to stay away from such inauthentic conversations. They subtly damage your credibility as a leader if you participate in them. In order to maintain your authenticity, carefully consider what questions you ask about future plans. Only ask questions that you and your followers are willing to have very frank discussions about. You may not have a strong enough relationships yet with some of your followers to ask questions which they might perceive damaging to their careers depending on how they answer them.

A word about trust...

Questions regarding the past, pain, pleasure, potential, and plans of your followers will give you a window into who they are and what truly motives and inspires them. Abuse this information by using it to manipulate people and situations and you will be sounding your own death knell as a leader. Using such information to manipulate followers into specific behaviors will damage others' ability to trust you and gain you a reputation that could permanently damage your ability to have such conversations in the future. This will significantly limit your ability to motivate and inspire followers in the future. Guard carefully how you use the personal answers you receive as you get to know your followers as the individuals that they are. Asking the questions suggested in this article can be a trust-building activity in and of itself. An additional way to build trust in such conversations is to share your own answers to the questions you are asking. In doing so, you will not only reveal who you are but will also give your followers examples of the type of information you are looking for.

Is it bad to know the latest golf score, spousal birthday, and favorite sports team of someone you are leading? Certainly not. But as you seek to maximize your potential as a leader by motivating and inspiring those you lead, do not mistake such personal artifacts as a substitute for really getting to know who they are as people. Yes, getting to know your followers, like getting to know anyone, takes an investment of time and effort on your part as the leader but it is a necessary investment for world-class motivators. "What did you do this weekend?" is fine question to ask but it is no substitute for

asking your followers about their past, pain, pleasure, potential and plans in order to know them deeply and understand best what motivates and inspires them.

Tim Spiker is a consultant with FMI, management consultants and investment bankers for the construction industry. Tim can be reached at 303.398.7251 or by e-mail at tspiker@fminet.com.

About FMI

Founded in 1953 by Dr. Emol A. Fails, FMI provides management consulting and investment banking for the worldwide construction industry.

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