

The Pitfalls of Using Coercion as Your Primary Approach for Influencing & Motivating Your Team

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Earlier this year, I wrote an article that articulated the benefits of using soft power as part of a Manager’s toolkit. The article suggested that employing the two types of soft power (Referent Power and Expert Power) is how the most effective Managers influence and motivate others in an organization.

The advantage of using soft power in the workplace is that it does not rely on a formal position or title, but instead relies on interpersonal relationships and credibility. In other words, the employee believes that the Manager’s request is reasonable, and what is being asked is important to accomplish. As a result, it has the ability to affect long-term changes in attitudes and behavior so that your employees are more apt to support corporate priorities and objectives.

In contrast, coercion is a short-term approach based upon authority, and should be limited to those situations that may require quick action or compliance. Derchat Keltner (a Social Psychologist) believes that, “Coercive power forces people to do things, while soft power inspires them to accomplish objectives.”

What is meant by hard power?

Management Authors Richard Daft and Dorothy Marcic define hard power as “influence that stems largely from a person’s position of authority in the organization.” They believe Managers utilize their position “to get compliance from those in a lower position on the hierarchical ladder.” They further assert, “when Managers absolutely have to achieve results mandated by their position, they may use hard power to do so.”

The three types of hard power that are generally recognized in the field of Management include the following:

- **Coercion** – this is based on the Manager’s ability to punish or recommend punishment. Under this approach, people follow orders to avoid punishment such as criticism, demotion or withholding a pay increase.
- **Legitimate Power** – this power results from a Manager’s formal position or title. People accept his or her right to issue orders or direct activities at the firm, based upon the Manager’s position on the organization chart.

- **Reward** – this is derived from the Manager’s ability to provide or withhold rewards. People comply in order to obtain the desired rewards, including merit raises and promotions.

Many Managers utilize a coercive approach because it is easy to apply, requires very little thought, and is a learned behavior from personal experience working for Managers.

How is coercion utilized by Managers to influence and motivate others?

Like soft power, coercion can be used in many ways to support the achievement of corporate and team goals or objectives. While there may be times when coercion may be appropriate, reliance on this technique as a Manager’s primary influencing tool can be detrimental to the Team, as well as the organization.

Here are some common examples of how coercion is utilized by Managers to achieve a desired result:

- threatening to withhold a merit raise if a project is not completed by the due date
- reminding team members that you have the power to punish them for undesirable behavior by virtue of your leadership position in the organization
- warning that subpar performance results will be weighed heavily against you in the annual performance review

What are the pitfalls of using a coercive approach?

Experts agree that utilizing coercion as a Manager’s main influencing approach can produce a negative impact. In many cases, it is the manner in which this management style is used (together with the perception of the tactic by employees) that creates a problem.

In addition, coercive methods often lead to unintended detrimental consequences that help destroy a positive corporate culture. Some of the ways that an over-reliance on coercion harms employees (and the organization) include the following:

- It can lower job satisfaction and reduce employee engagement so that the organization does not always get the best effort from its employees.
- It may reduce employee creativity and hinder the innovation needed to develop new products and services.
- It may create resentment by employees, and in an extreme case, result in retaliation against the supervisor.
- It can demotivate employees and help destroy morale, which negatively impacts employee productivity.
- It adds stress to an already stressful business climate, which may fuel employee turnover.
- It may damage the reputation of the Manager as others notice his / her inability to execute on corporate goals and initiatives.
- It may hinder the Manager’s ability to accomplish career success as he / she aspires to a Leadership role in the organization.

In conclusion, Managers who build good working relationships with their subordinates so they perform their jobs for internal reasons (i.e., intrinsic motivation) rather than because they have to, empower their Teams to achieve better business results and are able retain valued employees.

In light of the above potential pitfalls, what steps will you take to limit the use of coercion and focus instead on implementing soft power approaches for influencing and motivating the employees in your organization?