

Motivating the Minimum Wage Worker

by Jeff Davidson

Tony is 19 years old. He came to this country when he was 11, never graduated high school, and has only a rudimentary grasp of English. Tony works for you. He is a good worker, not often late and not one to complain. You can feel it though; he is not going to be here very long. He will pick up a few dollars and then move on, to where, who knows.

Is there anything you can do to increase the length of stay on the job for workers like Tony? The answer is yes.

Check Your Attitude

First, before any motivation program can succeed you need to check your attitude. As human beings, we are broadcasting all the time. What are you broadcasting to your crews? That they are replaceable? Expendable? Forgettable? That you are not really concerned with their needs? Don't automatically take the view that, "It's the nature of the business." It is precisely that attitude that partially helps perpetuate high turnover. Resolve here and now that you can take measures to increase the average longevity of minimum wage laborers, and that your attitude and initiative does make a difference.

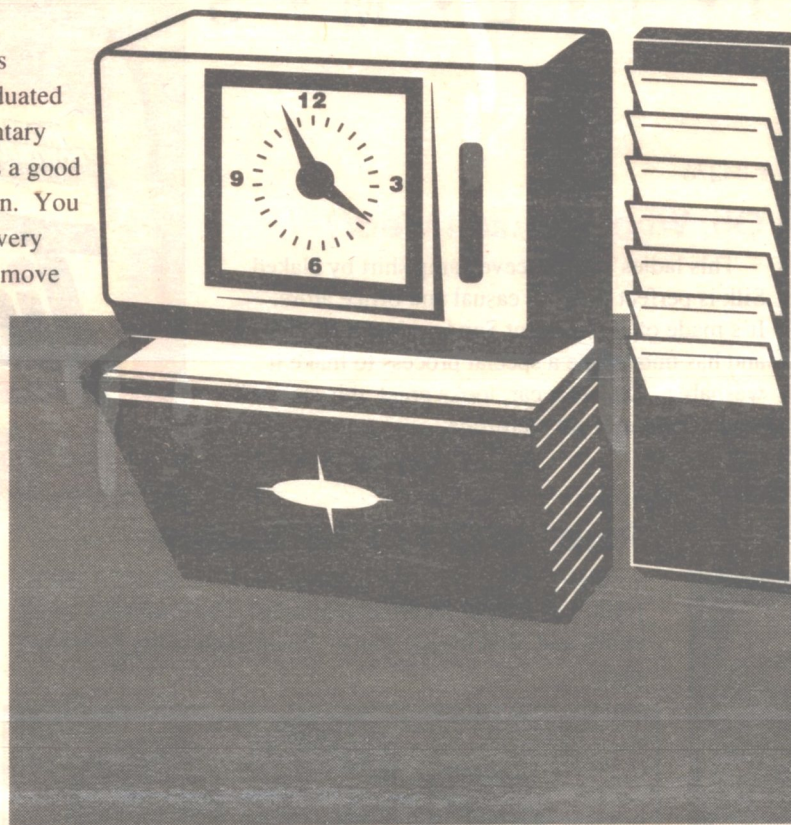
An Encouraging Word

How long would it take you to learn some key phrases in the language of your minimum wage laborers? Whether they speak Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean or anything else, you need to spend only a short time to master some conversational pleasantries. Many bookstores are stocked with bi-lingual dictionaries such as English/Spanish or English/Vietnamese. Even easier, sit down with one of your key bi-lingual staff members and jot down the phonetic spelling of phrases such as "How are you today," "You're doing a good job," or "It's lunch time."

Your effort to speak to others in their native tongue can create a bond that simply can't exist if your thoughts are restricted to English.

The Unannounced Break

Periodically, give your workers unannounced breaks. Augment these mini-vacations by having water or snacks distributed. The few dollars you may spend on such staples as hamburgers, french fries, apples, candy bars and soda will pay off in terms of greater



productivity and enhanced longevity among minimum wage workers.

You can't change the nature of the work, but you can change how you and Offering little perks pays off.

Rotating Leadership

Among some work teams, see if you can rotate leadership so that four crew members each have one day as foreman. For some of your workers, this may represent the first taste of leadership that they have ever experienced.

Rotating leadership is particularly effective when crew members are unfamiliar with each other. Among crew members familiar with each other this may be harder to implement as some individuals naturally exert dominance over others.

Set Up an Award System

The key to giving awards to workers is making the contest visual and short. You could post a wall chart indicating who has had the greatest number of consecutive days without an absence or tardiness. Whose performance has prompted words of praise from customers? Who has been outstanding in the last week? These and other types of achievements could be

easily charted and displayed to workers. People like to see their names on a chart followed by stars, checkmarks or other performance indicators. The chart could be language proof, (i.e. everyone recognizes their own name in English and stars, or dollar signs for the bonuses you'll offer).

After posting the charts, offer simple rewards such as cash, free lunch, more time as team leader, a special hat or other clothing and so on.

Create a Mentor System

Look for leaders among your workers who can serve as mentors to newly hired staff members. This alleviates your having to break in each and every worker. Those individuals deemed as mentors will be pleased with this special status and will not only assist in achieving smoother operations, but will help somewhat to alleviate quick departures among newly hired laborers.

Am I a Motivational Facilitator?

Here is a checklist to see if you're raising or lowering spirits, and increasing or decreasing turnover:

- Do I make sure employees understand how to properly complete an assigned job?
- Have I clearly indicated what results I expect?
- Do I offer adequate and continuous support?
- Do I take steps to cultivate positive relationships?
- Do I show sufficient concern for crew members as individuals?
- Have I established appropriate recognition and reward systems?
- Have I taken the time to both learn and dispense some encouraging phrases for enhanced communication with crew members?

If you can induce minimum wage workers to stay on an extra week or motivate someone to finish a big job on time, then you've made your job a little easier, and contributed to the profitability and long term viability of your company.

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