

Maintaining Motivation

I recently received a very interesting question from one of my readers that I thought was extremely appropriate for many of us. **J.R., I've been at my job now for almost two years. I love the people that I work with, but I feel that the work I'm doing may be a waste of time. I've been spending the past year churning out documents that, in my opinion, will never be read or used. How do I stay motivated in this type of environment? I really want my work and my life to mean something!** C.M., U.S. Air Force

C.M., you have hit upon something almost all of us have to deal with at some point in our careers. Boring, meaningless tasks that seem to be a waste of time are far too common. First off, my pet peeves are about the answers you are probably getting to your questions about why you are doing something stupid... "That's the way we've always done it around here." Or even worse, "you haven't been here long enough to tell us how it should be done". Combine that with the infuriating, "I don't care how you did it at your last job" and you have the perfect trifecta of stupid. Bureaucracy is cliché but only because it is so prevalent. Many of us have simply "sucked it up" and just done what we were asked. Others have become very creative in how they deal with the boredom and the drudgery this entails.

The first thing I encourage you to do is to be proactive and ask around. Find out if anyone actually does use your report. Let's face it. We don't know everything or everybody in most organizations that are larger than 500 people. There may be someone you don't know about that truly does depend on your information to do their job. Time to do some detective work to find out. Second task is to see if you can change or modify your report to contain information that is indeed useful to a particular audience. We have spent years talking about paying attention to the Voice of the Customer. Here is a prime opportunity to do just that. Never forget, if we just do something to make our boss happy without understanding what the user really needs or wants, the intended audience will not use our product. Talk to the people in each of the departments or the directorates that receive your report and ask them what they **need**. Ask them how they use it and what would they like to see. Most importantly, ask them what format or structure would help them most in order to enhance its usefulness to a broader audience.

Another aspect we need to be sensitive to is the incredible amount of information each of us receives every day. Phone calls, e-mails, links, packages, mailings, FedEx, UPS, and meeting notes and conference proceedings. All of it potentially useful...most of it simply noise.

Some people get incredibly creative with how they handle the large amount of information we are inundated with in today's workplace. I worked for a Senior Director in a very large aerospace firm who showed me his method for dealing with large piles of documents and reports in his inbox. While in his office one day, he asked me to hand him a large FedEx box. He then began to stuff it with everything that was in his inbox. Somewhat incredulous (I was still naive), I asked him what he was doing. He looked at me with a smile and said he was "determining the priority" of his workload. I thought for a minute and had to admit that I could not for the life of me figure this one out. He laughed and said "I'm mailing this to myself three-day mail". Why I asked...still slow on the uptake here...He said "if anyone comes in and asks for something, I can honestly say "It hadn't arrived yet. When it gets here I'll get back to you." If no one asks anything about any of it in three days, it can't be that important and I'll have my admin file it." I have to admit, it was very creative. And I tried it a couple of times...Didn't work for me.

I took, and continue to take, a different approach very much like not asking for permission, which we covered in a previous column. Before you engage with this strategy, do your homework. Ask around. Often, there is a need for information that we don't see because of poor communication and "stove piping" in our organizations. For your precise situation, if I am tasked with writing or analyzing a report or document that I can't find anyone using or caring about, I simply don't distribute it for a month. I **do** it...I just don't send it out. If no one asks for it in the following month, I produce the report for the second month, I just don't distribute it again. If no one has asked for it the second month, I produce the document for a third month and continue to sit on it. If someone finally asks about the report, I go to my files, produce it and give them a copy while offering an apology on why they were "inadvertently left off of distribution". In almost every single case where I took this action, no one ever asked me for the paperwork. After three months, I never did it again and never looked back.

This process has the advantage that if someone that you were unaware of actually needs the document, you have already done the work and they can't say you were negligent. If they don't...You have proven this is indeed a worthless report.



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I understand that you work for the government (I was also in the Air Force back when rubber bands were the aircraft motor of choice) and I am very familiar with all the paperwork and reports that are required. It can be maddening to have to spend time and effort on something we think is worthless. My challenge to you is to find a way to make it useful and use what you are creating to change the reality from a stupid exercise in bureaucracy, into an activity that adds value by creating what people need instead of something that "just meets requirements"!

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