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All aboard the train: Motivating the masses in hard times

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Motivation is a primary function in human behavior, defined as that which initiates, directs, and maintains behavior. Some behavioralists liken it to a car battery. Like the battery starting the car, motivation starts the behavior. Motivation then directs behavior toward certain goals and keeps the behavior going until that goal is reached. It is the drive to achieve goals or needs and is influenced by how much you want the goal, what you will gain, and your personal expectations (intrinsic motivation).

In the workplace, motivation can take many forms. What works to motivate one individual might be ineffective for another. Managers must constantly strive to find different ways to motivate employees and to keep them motivated to achieve goals. Employees often look for the answer to the question, “What’s in it for me?”

Many people struggle with motivation, but it is even more challenging when faced with a scenario that you believe was not your fault, but you are being asked to rise to the occasion, make sacrifices, and put in the extra effort. As a manager, how do you tackle this scenario, and how do you motivate employees?

I was involved in a scenario some years ago that involved a manufacturing site of 300 people, and this article is the story of the ticket, the way in which we motivated the masses in an attempt to achieve our goal: to stay in business!

The story of the ticket

I was employed to work for an American pharmaceutical company in the United States, all the way from Australia. This was quite a big thing for an Aussie! Australians seem to have a certain charm with Americans; they are fascinated by our accents, our different cultures, and even our different languages. For me, it was relatively easy to build a rapport with most of the people at the site, even in my role as the vice president of Quality Operations.

The company was a successful generic company and had been in business for several years. It did need its quality and compliance system strengthened, which was the primary reason for my employment, having built quality and compliance systems previously.

Not long after I started, we had an inspection from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA), which is not uncommon in the pharmaceutical industry. At different stages of a product’s life, the FDA will assess the site for compliance with the Code of Federal Regulations Title 21 (CFR).^[1]

What started out as a routine inspection quickly became the company’s worst nightmare. The inspection found

serious breaches of the CFR and imposed a warning letter on the company. This later developed into a consent decree, which is judicial recognition of an agreement between the FDA and a drugmaker that usually bars the drugmaker from manufacturing and distribution until it can prove, via a third party, that it has achieved and can sustain regulatory compliance.

Many of the employees were put on furloughed leave because the company was not in a position to manufacture. Employees were also retrenched as a cost-saving exercise. The remainder were left to deal with a corrective action plan to get the company back into a position of compliance. Those that remained were dejected, traumatized, confused, and in some cases depressed. Their whole working environment as they knew it had changed.

For many it was disbelief: “How could this happen to us? We have always done it this way, and it has not been a problem.”

Others were angry that the actions that had put them into this position had been allowed: Who was responsible?

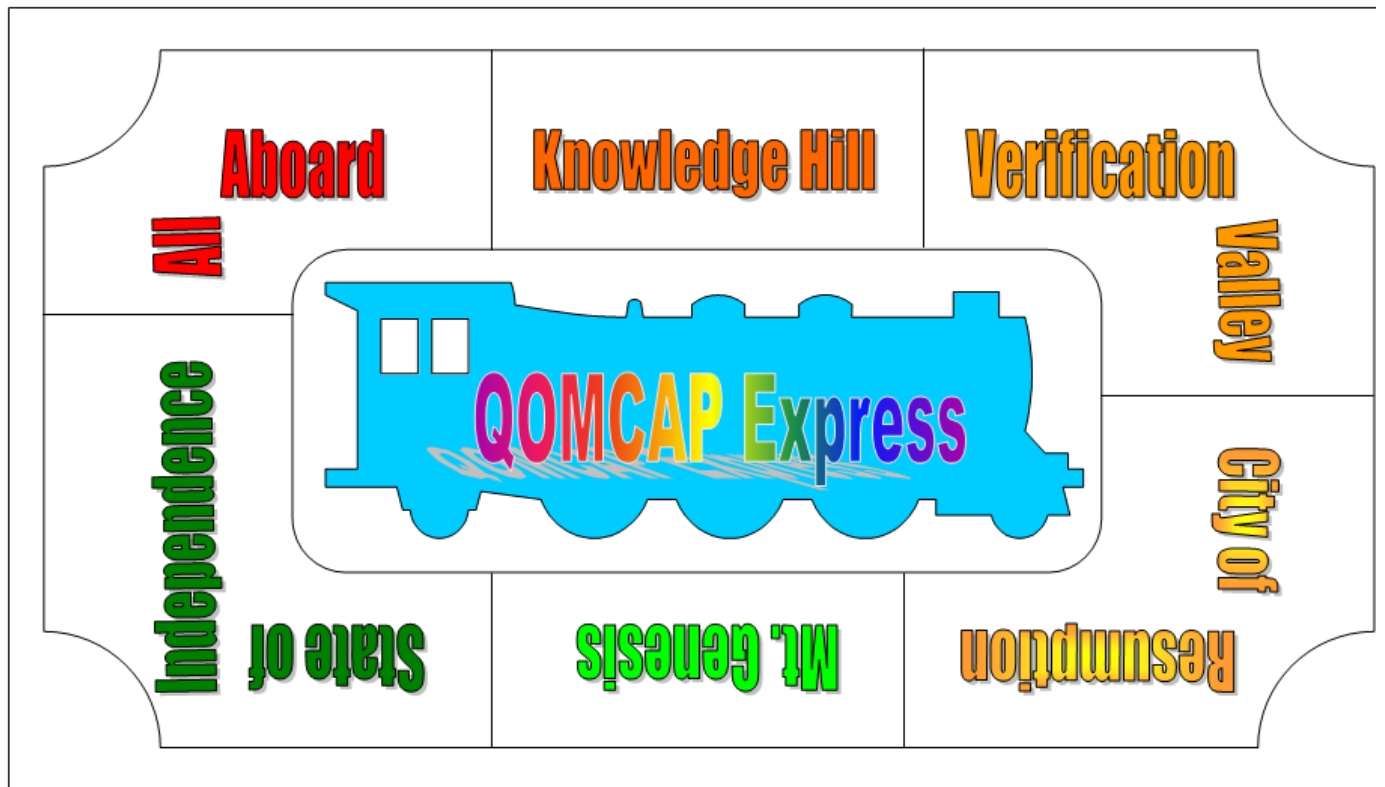
Still others were disappointed that they had to remain and clean up the mess while their colleagues sat at home on full pay doing nothing.

As the responsible executive member for compliance, my challenge was to provide the remaining employees with a framework to address the concerns from the inspection and remove the consent decree. This was the easy part. Developing a plan was a process of piecing together the resolution for the issues into a logical sequence. The hard part was motivating employees into a productive and helpful frame of mind.

The story of the ticket was born as a means of providing employees with hope and a pathway forward that was designed to inspire them to be part of the rebuilding of a new company with effective compliance systems.

The first step was to set the groundwork. We did this by creating a train ticket (Figure 1). The intent was that by using a train metaphorically, we could chart our progress to completion of the corrective action plan. The executives launched the concept at a company meeting to try and lighten the atmosphere, dressed as train engineers with overalls, peaked hats, and bandanas. Most of the employees started to engage. For the executive members (some of whom were known for their serious nature rather than extrovert behavior) to go to this extent to get across a point immediately aroused employee interest.

Figure 1: The QOMCAP ticket showing the achievement stations



If you are trying to motivate people to do things they do not normally do, you yourself need to be prepared to step outside your comfort zone.

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