SINCE THE BEGINNING of time, man has communicated information from generation to generation by means of myth and folklore. Societies, cultures, families and business organizations have transmitted concepts and traditional values by means of undocumented stories, tales and beliefs.

One common feature of most myth and folklore is the conspicuous absence of objective supporting data. Even when current experience overwhelmingly dictates otherwise, certain myths are perpetuated as if they continue to be true.

A common series of work myths involve employee motivation, the beliefs that “significant others” i.e., parents, first bosses, mentors, trainers, etc., hold about the “real” way to motivate employees.

**MYTH ONE**

*Some employees are motivated, some are not.*

One of the most pervasive motivation myths is the belief that “some employees are motivated, some are not”. This myth is based on the notion that motivation is largely an innate characteristic possessed by certain employees and not by others. Proponents suggest that the supervisor’s primary responsibility is “motivating the unmotivated” by means of structure and discipline. Despite extensive organizational research and experience to the contrary, the “motivated or not” myth persists.

Employee motivation continues to be one of the most critical variables in organizational productivity. One stream of research suggests that employees are internally motivated to satisfy their perceived needs. Maslow confirms that all employees are indeed motivated, but to satisfy their own individual needs, not necessarily the needs of the supervisor or the company. Maslow develops a hierarchy ranging from lower order physiological needs to higher order needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization. Festinger suggests that employees are motivated to maintain consistency between their expectations and reality. McClelland and Atkinson present evidence that employees are motivated by their perception of the performance required relative to the likelihood of success. The consistent theme in this stream of research is that employees are motivated to satisfy their perceived needs. To be successful, supervisors therefore must first of all identify and then seek to address the differing needs of each subordinate employee.

Another stream of research suggests that employee behavior is also influenced by external forces such as “significant others” and the work environment. Moll, Rosenthal and Oberlander conclude that the expectations (positive or negative) of the supervisor have a direct bearing on employee motivation and productivity. Rosenthal developed the
concept of the Self-Fulfilling Prophecy or Pygmalion Effect to explain the profound impact of the supervisor’s expectations of the subordinate on that person’s actual performance.

Organizational research for positive self-concept leads to the following conclusions:

1. What managers expect of their subordinates and the way they treat them largely determine their subordinates current performance and later career progress.

2. A unique characteristic of superior managers is their ability to create high performance expectations that subordinates fulfill.

3. Less effective managers fail to develop high performance expectations and, as a consequence, the immediate performance and career development of subordinates are diminished.

With focused training and development, the immediate supervisor can have a significant impact on subordinate productivity. Supervisory training and development begins with a clear understanding of their own predispositions and biases prior to attempting to manage the expectations and performance of others.

Next, the immediate supervisor must be trained in contemporary concepts and tools of employee motivation. Today’s supervisor must apply skills and assessment tools to identify employees’ ever expanding work-related needs and expectations. The supervisor’s role in “organizational effectiveness” involves the systematic measurement of, and response to, individual employee needs as well as the needs of the organization.

When employees understand that the supervisor (the company) is sincerely interested in their individual needs, they begin to act “motivated”, i.e., and they become business partners, not adversaries. Partners behave like “INTRApreneurs” committed to successful performance whatever it takes. An intrapreneurial environment involved the open exchange of information between “the partners” at all levels on an “as and when needed” basis with minimum interference from the formal hierarchy. A contagious increase in employee energy, productivity and satisfaction is the enduring by-product of the intrapreneurial environment. When the supervisor and employee are allowed to explore mutual expectations and mutual performance objectives in a trusting environment, “unmotivated employees” become obsolete.

Are the supervisors in your organization trained to identify and respond to the work-related needs of their subordinate employees? Is each employee working toward a set of shared common objectives mutually developed in a spirit of openness and trust with his/her supervisor? Is there a spirit of “intrapreneurship” at all levels of your organization?
MYTH TWO

Everyone works for money.

Many people who grew up during the Depression and in later periods of inflation-recession have been (pre) conditioned that material resources are the only tangible security of real value. Maslow was one of the first industrial psychologists to develop a series of theories to explain why people/employees become preoccupied with and controlled by a *Hierarchy of Human Needs*. (Food and safety/security are the basic/lower level human needs. Love, esteem and self-actualization are described, as higher order/level needs). Maslow hypothesized that each of us must satisfy lower-level personal needs, such as safety and security, before higher-level personal needs can have much perceived value and attention.

The money-employee motivation issue is quite complex because of individual perception. Some employees believe that money “buys” higher order needs. Some perceive that money is a tangible benchmark to assess one’s relative worth in society. For others, money and its many uses are easier to understand (and achieve) than “higher level” needs such as self-esteem and self-actualization.

Herzberg, also an industrial psychologist, suggests that when employees believe they are being paid fairly, they are “satisfied”. As a result, incremental increases in salary and/or bonuses do not necessarily bring about corresponding increases in performance. Herzberg laid the theoretical (and practical) foundation for McClelland, Schein and Delong by identifying and labeling *intrinsic* factors such as the needs for involvement, recognition, control and freedom. Herzberg hypothesized that employees will be more motivated to meet their individual “intrinsic” needs than their “extrinsic” needs, such as pay, benefits and other tangible perks.

Management’s failure to systematically identify and address employee’s intrinsic needs can explain why employees unionize even though a company has a highly competitive compensation package. When a company “under-responds” to employees’ intrinsic needs, employees are not motivated to perform consistently even at moderate levels. “Throwing money” at people brings about small and short-lived increases in performance.

Ironically, the core principle of collective representation is to focus on “extrinsic” factors, such as wages, hours and physical working conditions to the exclusion of the individual employee (intrinsic) needs. In fact, responding to and rewarding individual performance is prohibited by most labor agreements.

Later research by Schein and Delong supports that employees are motivated by a wider variety of intrinsic needs than previous research has identified, i.e.: the need for social interaction, autonomy, personal control/power, performance feedback, self-esteem, etc. Related research done by Lawler suggests that employers can actually extinguish employees’ intrinsic needs by inattention. As a result, extrinsic needs such as pay and benefits become the employee’s exclusive focus. Lawler’s research may also explain why some “well compensated” employees express low job satisfaction and a lack of personal/professional fulfillment.
Have the managers and supervisors in your organization been trained in the effective use of extrinsic and intrinsic motivation? Are intrinsic needs measured and discussed with employees? If intrinsics are not addressed directly, how do employees get their intrinsic needs met? Are managers and supervisors equipped with contemporary assessment tools to identify and respond to each employee’s unique skills and career development needs? Has money become the only real tangible way employees can gauge their worth? What can you do to identify and respond to “intrinsic” needs of your non-union and/or unionized employees?

**MYTH THREE**

*M* employees need to be pushed to perform.

Many supervisors are driven by the motivational myth that employees need intensive and continuous direction/structure to perform adequately. Douglas McGregor labeled the “push to perform” management style as Theory X. McGregor suggested that Theory X orientation causes a manager to use high control and limited delegation to make sure that lazy and self-serving employees do not take advantage of management and the company.

Conversely, McGregor described the management style of recognizing employees as self-directed and self-controlling as Theory Y. The Theory Y manager believes that employees under proper conditions not only accept, but also seek, responsibility. The Theory Y manager also expects employees to be imaginative, ingenious and creative and acts accordingly. Ouchi developed Theory Z in response to McGregor’s X and Y contending that participative and holistic work relationships build employee self-worth and, therefore, productivity.

Contemporary research and practical experience indicates that employees do seek varying amounts of direction from those in authority. Brunstetter and Hayes suggest that employees have varying needs for a balance of personal freedom and organizational structure. Contrary to popular belief, employees need, expect and often demand differing amounts of freedom and structure.

What makes the freedom-structure phenomena difficult to manage is the high degree of variability among employees. Generic management techniques and supervisory training programs fail to adequately accommodate individual employee differences, and, therefore, little or no change occurs in on-the-job behavior. Many “prescribed” techniques suggest a Theory X management style with the appearance of being Theory Y or Z. Supervisor-employee trust declines rapidly when employees perceive that management is “playing with them”. The decline of the Quality Circle movement is an example of approving “generic” management techniques without a substantial change in underlying management values. A typical Quality Circle “program” does not significantly change the way important decisions are made. Consequently, employees lose interest when the positive effects of improving “hygiene” factors wear off and only few employees are
allowed legitimate input to important decisions, such as product development, strategic planning, capital expenditure, etc.

Action research results suggest that productivity improvement should be systematic and not exclusively dependent on the management style and values of the supervisor. The employee and supervisor need to independently identify and understand their own unique work-related needs. A common measurement tool and common language must then be developed to guarantee the systematic measurement of these employee/supervisor needs and values. Increases in productivity begin with increased trust between the supervisor and the employee. Systematic trust building continues with an ongoing sharing of these work related needs in a safe and open work environment.

In earlier myths, we discussed the need for mutual supervisor-employee commitment in a spirit of openness and trust to performance goals and objectives. Maximizing performance involves a mutual effort in performance planning, ongoing performance feedback and modifications to desired activities and goals, as needed.

What has been done to insure the proper balance between direction and freedom in your organization? What leadership style does your work culture reward for directing and motivating employees? What can you do to encourage mutual supervisor-employee efforts in increasing trust and openness? What can you do to improve performance, planning, ongoing feedback and off-course correction?

MYTH FOUR
Participation in a training program will increase an employee’s productivity.

A widespread contemporary motivation myth is the belief that a “generic” (standardized) training program, in and if itself, can guarantee improved performance and/or correct performance. This generic “quick fix” myth is enduring because of its apparent simplicity, speed of implementation and “low cost per head”. Unfortunately, most standardized programs loose in effectiveness what is gained in efficiency because of:

1. An over-emphasis on cost control and an under-emphasis on training “effectiveness.

2. Inadequate consideration of the individual participant’s training needs.

3. A decided lack of involvement and support for training activities by the participant’s supervisor and work team (culture).

Budget constraints have made training activities largely “cost driven” in most companies. In response, training administrators attempt to “spread” training expenses and time over the largest number of participants as possible. Most generic programs are sold to top management using an “efficiency” or “economies of scale” theme with little or no
attempt to objectively measure the “effectiveness” of the training as a productivity intervention.

By design, the standardized training program is “efficient” in the content (what) and process (how) of delivery. If effectiveness is to be achieved, however, the differing needs and learning styles of participants must also be considered. Research in adult development (Knowles) suggests that people continue to learn and develop throughout their life, but “how” people learn changes with age. Younger, less experienced employees tend to respond to training that begins with classroom lectures and textbooks (pedagogy) followed later by application of concepts in “live” situations (andragogy). The more experienced employee is continually attempting to integrate and apply prior learning to the training activity. Mature employees are generally more impatient with pedagogy techniques and generally learn faster when basic concepts can be applied immediately. Most generic training programs fail because of an over-reliance on standardized/generic training techniques and participant inability to immediately integrate previous experience.

The ineffectiveness of standardized training programs can also be traced to inadequate consideration of the work environment to which the employee will return after training. Without “pre” and ‘post” supervisory involvement and positive reinforcement from co-workers, new training is often quickly “unlearned”.

Certain training can and should be done effectively and efficiently in groups, while other training may involve coaching, mentoring and/or individual work with the supervisory or other key individuals. Generic programs systematically “under-respond” to the specific training needs of the individual employee because of the lack of balance among training modalities.

For maximized effectiveness and efficiency, employee training must respond to the needs of the employee as well as the company. In the writer’s experience, “maximized” training should include the following:

1. A training needs analysis and customized training plan for each employee with direct involvement of the immediate supervisor and consideration of the work environment (culture).

2. A training objective/requirement indicating expected on-the-job behaviors, measurements and rewards.

3. The “measured” delta between each participant’s expected and actual levels of performance including a specific design on how the training activity will close the gap.

4. Consideration of an employee’s related prior experience including activities that respond to the employee’s individual style and unique learning needs.

What have you done to perpetuate or correct the “generic” training program myth? What can be done to better “educate” your managers and supervisors as to the
appropriate use of training? What can be done to increase the value and credibility of training in your organization?

MYTH FIVE

The absence of expressed employee concerns indicates that morale is good.

Those who support the “assume the best” myth believe that if and when an employee has a problem, he/she will share it with the immediate supervisor. The appeal of “assume the best” is in its “reactive” nature, i.e., the onus is on the employee to act and the company (the supervisor) to react. In the writer’s experience, however, most employees do not share work-related concerns without the “proactive” encouragement of the immediate supervisor. Here are some notable barriers that must be overcome in order to create and maintain an open and trusting work environment:

1. Lack of employee trust that the immediate supervisor clearly understands and is concerned with the employee’s best interest.

2. Fear of retribution (sooner or later) from the immediate supervisor.

3. Low employee self-confidence and lack of skill in presenting ideas and concerns, verbally or in writing.

4. The belief that expressing concerns is a sign of disloyalty and/or lack of appreciation.

The importance of the supervisor-employee relationship in building an open and trusting work environment cannot be underestimated. Recent organizational research suggests that the personal “chemistry” between the employee and the supervisor (Taylor) is a critical link to mutual productivity. Research in supervisor-employee productivity (Brunstetter) indicates that mutual awareness for preferred work “styles” and work-related “motivators” are related to increased productivity and satisfaction.

Creating a “system-wide” problem resolution procedure is an additional way of creating a “proactive” work environment. A vertically integrated problem resolution can be quick and consistent if employees can air problems openly and if supervisors are given the authority to deal with the majority of issues at their own level. Successively higher-level reviews of lower level decisions, if done quickly and openly, are a powerful way to channel employee energy without fear of retribution. Often employees just want to know that higher management has been involved and that issues have been resolved equitably and consistently. Employees also want to see their supervisor “fighting” for them at higher levels of the organization.

The organization and the immediate supervisor are responsible for assisting employees where needed in defining, documenting and presenting work-related ideas and concerns. Ideally, the immediate supervisor can help the employee by “talking through”
the idea/concern and by “reflective listening”. The supervisor can also assist by presenting the issue to higher management if the issue cannot be worked out at the supervisor’s level. Some organizations offer skill training in oral and written presentations, while others train employees in “creative” problem solving. A powerful tool to assist employees and to build employee trust is to have the supervisor act as an employee “advocate” at the higher levels of problem resolution. Suffice to say, most organizations need to find additional ways of assisting employees in expressing their work-related needs and expectations.

The effective supervisor must somehow eliminate the impression that expressing concerns is disloyal or shows a lack of appreciation. When employees are overtly or covertly discouraged from expressing themselves, they often develop their own internal support system (network). An exclusively “reactive” work environment often leads to job-related stress, lowered productivity, increased absenteeism/tardiness and eventually outside (union) representation. Surprisingly, most unionization efforts begin with employees looking for a union to represent them, not vice-versa.

What have you done to build supervisory-employee openness and trust? Does your organization have a problem solving procedure that employees believe really works? If not, what can be done? How aware and skilled are your supervisors in the role of employees advocate? What can be done to maintain nonunion status or, if unionized, to rebuild employee confidence in immediate supervision and in “the system”?

**MYTH SIX**

Tell employees what you expect of them, let them do it their way and then reward/reprimand accordingly.

The recent volume of books and articles on “how to” manage and motivate appear to advocate benevolent autocracy as a means of establishing “management control”. “Tell-Delegate-Reward-Punish”, one of the most popular approaches, directs managers to provide initial direction by “telling employees what is expected of them”. Direction is followed by delegation, i.e., “then letting them do it their way”. Rewards and/or punishments are based on the subjective judgments and values of the immediate supervisor with little or no employee involvement. The obvious appeal of “Tell-Delegate-Reward-Punish” is that (position) power is exclusively vested with management. The need for, and importance of, the supervisor’s informal (personal) power is virtually ignored. The “Tell-Delegate-Reward-Punish” approach is based on the following assumptions.

1. An equal amount of trust exists between all supervisors and their employees.

2. An equal need (and tolerance) exists among all employees for direction, structure and freedom.
The company can mandate a supervisor’s authority in the form of a title, a “uniform”, or a name on an organization chart. Corporate policy and practice generally mandates employee conduct in response to authority, i.e., “follow valid orders based on the uniform”. In traditional organizations, it follows that formal rewards and sanctions are based on the supervisor’s (the company’s) authority to manage.

Conversely, the supervisor’s power to manage comes from those supervised in the form of earned respect, admiration, and acceptance of leadership. Informal supervisor-employee agreements, rewards and sanctions have a “power” effect on productivity and become the shared responsibility of both the employee and the supervisor. Tell-Delegate-Reward-Punish does not recognize that employees confer supervisory power or that mutual trust and openness, rather than authority, is the foundation for the supervisor-employee relationship.

Mutual trust and commitment develops as the result of supervisor-employee awareness and an ongoing response to mutual needs. The supervisor’s authority, in and of itself, is insufficient to generate and sustain employee trust, commitment and productivity. The stream of individual differences research developed by McClelland, Schein, Delong and others suggests that an employee differs significantly in what they need, want and expect from their work situation. Three highly researched individual differences are the need for personal freedom (autonomy), the need for personal control (power) over people and situations. Tell-Delegate-Reward-Punish directs supervisors to make work-related decisions as if employee needs and expectations were generic without factoring in individual differences. How can this individual employee trust that his/her interests are being represented when the supervisor treats all employees as if they want and expect the same things?

The writer suggests that performance planning, measurement and rewards should include the employee’s unique work-related skills and needs as well as the formal requirements of the company. Creating an “employee responsive” work environment is infinitely easier and more productive than exclusively focusing on corporate needs and requirements. Managers and supervisors should be more creative in taping into unique skills and interests by “fitting the job to the employee” whenever and wherever possible. The effective supervisor continually integrates the employee and the organization so that both continue to be satisfied. In addition, management in effective organizations develops an integrated performance management system to consistently measure and reward productivity and satisfaction at all levels.

Do your company’s policies and procedures assume that all employees must be told what to do? What needs to be done to reconcile your company’s responsibilities under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and the apparently conflicting need to respond to the unique differences, needs and expectations among supervisors and employees? What has been done to reward your managers and supervisors for developing and maintaining open, trusting, and informal relationships with employees? What have you done to
encourage intrinsic motivation and employee commitment in your own department and the company as a whole?

MYTH SEVEN
All employees respond positively when asked to “participate” in work related decision-making.

One of the most widespread, and yet misunderstood motivation myths is the idea that all employees innately with to participate in work related decision-making. Consequently, employee participation programs have been touted as a panacea for maximizing employee performance and morale. Unfortunately, most participation activities fail due to management’s collective “under appreciation” for the extensive effort and time required to legitimately involve employees in work related decision-making.

Participation proponents assume that all employees are the same, i.e., have an equal level of ownership, skill and commitment to their work and the company. Organizational research, however, suggests that employees are not equal in ownership, skill and commitment. Therefore, participation is effectively only under certain defined work situations and only with certain employees. For example, productivity has been shown to increase if the employee and supervisor are mutually involved in setting the specific performance goals and measurements that are used to reward the employee (Wexley, Singh & Yukl). Additionally, Wexley, et. al, confirm the importance of a work culture that provides ongoing problem solving and appropriate changes during the performance period. Kerr suggests that the lack of legitimate mutual participation in goal settings discourages employees from taking performance related risks or making changes in performance activities to accommodate unforeseen events.

Historically, proponents of “worker participation” fueled the return of employee involvement in decision making to American industry in the form of “Quality Circles”. Originally touted as the answer to tapping employee productivity, the Quality Circle movement is experiencing rapid decline due to a lack of management and employee “buy in” to the effort and the commitment required. Eventually employees perceive that Quality Circles are a management ploy because the work culture continues to reward individual, not team performance.

Employee participative activities can even be “de-motivational” under certain circumstances and with certain employees because all employees do not respond positively to direct involvement. Certain employees are motivated by a more directive leadership style and are in fact de-motivated by increased “participation”. Supervisors must identify and respond to differing “followership” styles among employees.

The writer’s experience in productivity improvement suggests that effective employee participation must include:

1. A climate of mutual awareness, respect and trust between the employee and the supervisor.
2. A mutually developed and ongoing plan for building the employee-supervisor work relationship.

3. Mutually developed performance goals for the employee including areas of accountability, related activities and objective measurements.

4. A specific mechanism to mutually handle changing performance requirements, developed in advance and implemented prior to the performance period.

Are individual performance objectives mutually developed with the supervisor and the employee? Are there specific mechanisms in place to change performance objectives as and when required? What is being done to encourage employee involvement and commitment to your organization?

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What is Needed?  
An Integrated Process!

What is needed is a systematic means of measuring and integrating the needs of the employee, the supervisor and the requirement/needs of the organization. Managers and supervisors need to discard their generic motivation myths and concentrate on developing individual employee excellence in the context of organizational requirements.

Here are some specific suggestions to managers and supervisors at all levels:

?? Discover what motivates your employees and systematically integrate employee needs fulfillment and job requirements.

?? Develop fair and equitable “total compensation” policies based on intrinsic, as well as extrinsic, employee needs.

?? Place managers, supervisors and employees in specific roles based on the skills, work styles and motivators required to achieve business objectives.

?? Train and develop employees based on a thorough analysis of what is needed, by whom and in what circumstances.

?? Expensive and “useless” generic training programs should be eliminated.

?? Design and implement short term and moderate term “organizational effectiveness” activities at all levels.