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Fairness and Employee Motivation

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A positively motivated workforce is the linchpin of organizational effectiveness and efficiency. This is why employment motivation attracts considerable attention from management scholars and practitioners alike. Motivation drives employees, individually and collectively, in the workplace. Whether an employee is successful or shirking, dedicated or apathetic, behaving or misbehaving, his/her output is the result of motivational forces. Of course, employee output includes complaint, grievances and, in extreme cases, lawsuits. Thus, understanding the forces that drive employees can help employers mitigate legal exposure.

In a general sense, employee motivation can be understood by analogy to the laws of motion. An employee at rest will stay at rest unless acted upon by a prevailing motivational force. Work is produced when a motivational force acts on an employee. An employee at work will remain at work unless acted upon by a countervailing motivational force. For every motivational force, there is an equal and opposite motivational force. Yet, motivation is more complex. Motivational forces may be physical, metaphysical, emotional, intellectual, rational or irrational. Moreover, motivation is unique to each individual employee and varies over time and with changes in the employee's personal life, work environment and personal values and beliefs.

In a recent survey of 1,500 employees in Tennessee, the respondents ascribed their motivation to serving their clients, their religious beliefs, their conception of justice, the pursuit of meaning, the mission of their organization, their familial obligations, the esteem of their peers, professionalism in their industry, rewards and recognition, the achievement of results and an intrinsic work ethic. The respondents also identified the effects of management, salary, staffing, training, resources, workload, benefits, job characteristics, work environment, professional advancement and collegiality on their effort. It is in these areas that employers have the most significant opportunities to shape the workplace with a view toward enhancing motivation and mitigating the detrimental effects of disaffection.

In general, employees tend to recoil from micromanaging and favor autonomy. They are discouraged by poor communications and favor openness. They dislike office politics and prefer equity. When it comes to salary, employees favor performance-based pay, skill-based pay and experience-based pay. They also favor equal treatment among similarly situated employees and take umbrage at age, gender and race-based disparities. In other words, broadly speaking, employees want to be treated fairly. That is the common element shared by all of these issues. When employees turn their attention to resources, staffing, training and workload, they want to be supported and put in a position from which they can be successful. This sentiment can also be reduced to fairness. Employees do not want to be set up for failure or stretched beyond capacity.

So what does this mean for employers? By promoting a sense of fairness in the areas discussed here, employers can increase their chances of having a positively motivated workforce. A positively motivated workforce and positively motivated employees are less likely to make complaints and file grievances. They are also less likely to file lawsuits.