

PM World Today Tips & Techniques

Managing People's Threshold of Pain

By Rob Posener

A feature of the IT industry is its high staff turnover in comparison to most other industries. Part of the blame for this can be attributed to the shortage of technical staff. However, a large proportion of the blame is attributed to poor management.

Many managers fail to recognise there is such a thing as a "Threshold of Pain". Employees do not leave their current employer just because they are asked to do something which they find distasteful. Nor do they leave just because they are asked to work in an environment which is distasteful. They leave because the cumulative effect of these items of pain pushes them over their Threshold of Pain. In other words... the manager expects the employee to survive more stress than he or she can handle.

In any enterprise there are always going to be activities to perform which are not fun. The professional people manager needs to:

1. Determine each employee's individual Threshold of Pain
2. Determine each employee's current Threshold of Pain Point Score
3. Manage each employee's work assignments and work environment to be sure the employee's Point Score doesn't exceed the Threshold of Pain

To determine an individual's Threshold of Pain you need to get to know and engage with them. Understand their likes and dislikes. Understand their hot buttons and their turn-offs. Make it personal.

You can manage the Point Score by protecting the employee or assigning the item of pain to someone who can tolerate it. You can protect the employee by doing the item of pain yourself. BUT, be careful you do not go over your own Threshold of Pain. It is easy to fall into this trap. Managers who have not yet learnt to delegate properly need to be careful.

You should give the item of pain to someone who currently has a Point Score which, when adding the Point Score for the item of pain, will cause that employee's Point Score to remain below his or her Threshold of Pain.

Below are some general Threshold of Pain rules:

- Each employee has his or her own individual Threshold of Pain
- The Threshold of Pain is a notional "Point Score"
- Negative items of pain add to the Point Score
- Doing something good for an employee does not usually subtract from the Point Score. You have to take away the negative items of pain to reduce the

Point Score. We all know the rule... "employees remember the bad things but not the good things"

- Young and immature employees have a low Threshold of Pain
- Some items of pain are cumulative
- Some items of pain are fatal
- Some items of pain inflict greater pain than others
- You can exceed an employee's Threshold of Pain with a single, fatal item of pain, or with a number of items of pain
- If there is something wrong with the work environment, it has an effect on every employee. Thus, fixing work environment problems (ie, creating a conducive work environment) should have a high priority since they have a high return on your invested time
- Highly motivated employees will have a lower Threshold of pain, because they:
 - Enjoy the work
 - Enjoy the company of their colleagues
 - Like the boss, or
 - Support the values that the enterprise stands for.

Some examples:

- Not giving an employee a pay rise this year could be a fatal environmental item of pain. In of itself, it is probably good enough to be sure the employee will leave
- Similarly, moving offices across town can be enough for an employee to leave. This again, is a fatal environmental item of pain
- Asking an employee to make a cup of tea for you can be an item of pain. It may not be if, for instance, you are in the habit of making cups of tea for your employees. If the employee has a high current Point Score, the employee will leave. If the employee is nowhere near his or her Threshold of Pain, this will just add to the Point Score and there will probably be no other consequences. You need to remember this item of pain when next assigning an item of pain to that same employee

Managing the Threshold of Pain is just one of many people management techniques. Its usage can lead to a reduction in staff turnover. When you understand the concept, you can use it to your advantage... either way.



Robert Posener



Mr. Robert Posener, PMP, is an International Correspondent for www.pmforum.org based in Sydney, Australia. Mr. Posener is also founder and Managing Director of PMComplete Pty Ltd, a project management professional services company in Australia. For the last 30 years, Robert has managed projects for computer hardware, software and technology companies in Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Indonesia, Hong Kong and USA. Rob can be reached at robert.posener@pmcomplete.com.au. More information about Robert Posener can be found at www.pmforum.org/correspondents.