

How do you, as a manager, drive results?  
Start by clearing the road for your employees.

## business issues

### SET THE COURSE

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**ONE SUMMER IN THE EARLY 90s**, I (Christian) was a young project engineer, fresh out of college, working for a small fabricator on the South Side of Chicago.

It was the kind of place where an office was whatever workspace you could carve out for yourself and a desk was a hollow-core door laid over two banged-up filing cabinets. But there I sat, at my makeshift desk, doing my best to run my own jobs cradle to grave as it were—estimating, selling, detailing and managing—sometimes even stepping out into the shop to layout and fit.

On one particular utility trench job, I made a rookie mistake on the shop drawings. Luckily, our skilled craft workers caught the error and brought it to my supervisor's attention. His response was to storm into my "office," throw his clipboard at my head, upend my door/desk and berate me in the most colorful language I had heard to date (and possibly even in the years since). Such was my first experience with a manager trying to drive me to better results! Unfortunately, his approach only drove me to get a different job, hoping to find a place where I could learn from my mistakes—and not just how to duck clipboards.

In the years since, I've worked for many managers—some good, some not-so-good—and what I've learned is this: Management isn't so much about driving as it is about clearing the road, setting a course and then allowing good employees to drive themselves. Great leaders inspire their employees, and their impact lasts in their absence—that is to say that inspired employees are able to drive results themselves without constant micromanagement and correction. We all know this to be true instinctively. Those of us who love the steel business don't need any additional reasons to come to work every day. But in order to do our best work, we need our managers to clear a path and allow us to do what we do best.

So how, as managers, do we inspire our employees? How do we build them up to perform at this level and drive results? Well, as you already know, you can't build anything without laying a strong foundation, and the method for building inspired employees is no different. Consider these steps:

**Lay a foundation.** Building a strong foundation for your employees starts with meeting them where they already are. Great managers manage individual employees according to their individual needs, and you can't do that if you don't know them. Get to know your employees. Instead of barking orders indiscriminately, ask your employees questions and then listen to their answers. Every employee comes to the table with certain skills and abilities, and before you can build on that you need to see and assess them clearly. Find out what they know, what they value and what motivates them. Observe their work, look for roadblocks and ask how you can assist in smoothing the process.

**Provide employees with safety and security.** In our industry, we constantly work on how to keep our employees physically safe, but building inspired employees requires us to go a step further. In this context, providing safety and security requires clear, open and honest communication with our employees. Businesses have challenges and nothing is guaranteed, but our employees will trust us if we're open with them about what those challenges are, clear about the direction the company is taking and honest about how their contributions fit into the plan. In addition, great results require



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us all to learn from our mistakes, so fostering an environment where employees can own their errors and learn from them is key. Providing safety means making space for employees to err and recover without threats or fear of reprisals like humiliation and termination—or flying clipboards.

**Give employees a sense of belonging.** Teamwork is often talked about in business, but it is rarely truly achieved. And that's because building great teams takes time, energy and intent. It requires managers to do more than use teamwork as a buzzword. It involves assigning roles and responsibilities within the team, encouraging team members to use each other to solve problems and then stepping back and letting them do it. It requires us to bring employees into the huddle, explain the why behind the decisions we're making and then empower them to figure out the how. Occasionally, it requires managers to step in, negotiate conflict, calm egos and get the team's train back on the track. In short, it requires active management of team dynamics in order to keep the team functioning optimally. But when all this can be achieved—and when employees learn to problem-solve together and trust each other—a sense of true belonging results.

**Build employee esteem.** There's a reason why recognition programs are all the rage in HR circles these days. It's because studies show that they work. The number one reason employees leave their jobs is that they don't feel appreciated, and organizations with effective employee recognition programs have 31% lower voluntary turnover. Perhaps more importantly, 41% of companies that use peer-to-peer recognition have seen positive increases in customer satisfaction. So there it is: a direct correlation between employee recognition

and those positive results we are trying to achieve. In order for recognition to be most effective, it should be timely, specific and sincere—and, we might also add, frequent. Three-quarters of employees who receive monthly recognition from their bosses report being satisfied with their jobs, and that number jumps to 85% when recognition is weekly. So, make it a habit to catch your employees doing something right, and reinforce those desired behaviors with recognition.

**Achieve employee self-actualization.** OK, you got me. For the psychology majors out there, you may now recognize these five steps as following Maslow's well-known hierarchy of needs (Google it). The theory is true and it applies to work just as well as to life. And the top of the pyramid, where we find the truly inspired employees, is a kind of occupational self-actualization. If we invest our time and energy into our employees, if we lay the foundation—build trust, provide safety, encourage belonging and build esteem through recognition—then we will almost certainly have employees who are inspired and capable of reaching their full potential. These actualized employees drive great results for our companies.

It's been said many times that steel fabrication is not for the faint of heart, but we as managers can drive results and make it a positive experience by inspiring our employees. Yes, we will have to invest our time and energy into this process, but the results are well worth the effort. ■

*This article was based on Session Q5 "How do You, as a Manager, Drive Results?" at NASCC: The Steel Conference, which took place April 11-13 in Baltimore. You can view a free PowerPoint-and-audio version of the presentation at [www.aisc.org/educationarchives](http://www.aisc.org/educationarchives) (search for "Q5").*