Motivations

Survival or Growth

All the conflict in the world is not between good and evil, it’s between one man’s good vs. another man’s good.

In my own head, I am not a bad guy at all. I am pretty good. This is true for most of us. Most of us think we are pretty good guys. And that is fair, because we’ve gone through a lot of things, learnt a lot of hard lessons and improved and that’s the reason that we are at the place we are today. The problem is just that a lot of other guys don’t understand anything. In fact, a lot of us at some point have felt we work with <insert your favorite adjectives>. If we were to conduct a survey with two simple questions: A) Are you a good employee? B) Do you think most of your co-workers are awesome? The answers would be obvious and a statistical ‘wtf!’

So, why do all good people come together to form a bad group? This is the question I am trying to answer.

## Problem

Our personal motivations are what drive us, even in office. If I have a family to feed and kids to send to school, I’d want to keep my job as safe as possible. If I crave for some meaning in life, I’d rather do some impactful work. If I want to go for an MBA, I’d want my work experience to have the required qualities. If I want to buy a fancy car, I’d want a big bonus. And so on…Even though all these things play a vital role in our decision making process, we consider these to be personal and that these things shouldn’t come in way of your work. That has not worked. All individuals come to work to fulfill their personal aspirations. Even those of us who love our work and have our personal life sorted come in for a certain set of qualities in the work that we personally take pride in and connect with.

The problem is that we don’t try to understand these motivations and often end up in conflicts. A classic example is when a new intern joins, who has nothing to lose but is looking for a chance to prove himself. So he proposes an entirely new way of solving X problem. But the project manager has a wife, kids and mortgage - a lot to lose. The boss wouldn’t be willing to risk it on a fresh grad and the junior guy would get frustrated.

This happens much more frequently than we would think. The density of meeting room bookings is a good indicator of the number of ongoing conflicts in the teams. It’s not often that I actually need a room full of people to discuss just work. Anyone’s desk is equally suitable for that. But I’d certainly need to be behind closed doors when what I am saying is in conflict with someone else. And most of these instances are in state of conflict because everyone is trying to use the situation for his own personal good. That is just the nature of work in this style of economy. So, we should think about structuring it in such a way that anyone’s personal good doesn’t come in others way. In fact, if we align everyone’s personal good well enough we could have a lot of dream teams.

## Going Deeper

We can’t understand all our colleagues completely, nor would we want to in most cases. There is also something called privacy that all of us like to have. So even though we might not see the exact motivation that any employee has we can certainly classify it broadly and act accordingly. I think there are two broad categories of motivations:

* Survival
* Growth

#### Survival

These employees wouldn’t want things to go wrong with them. They would not take risks and would be the first ones to keep backups. They would like to have things in their control. They would want control over budget and employees. They are most likely to try to position themselves as the guy company’s business should depend on.

Turn on: Power

Turn off: Risk

#### Growth

These employees seek newness and impact in their work. They are willing to take risks. They are open to face failures and then improve and grow. They look for challenges and have no particular inclination to play safe. They are most willing to share information, teach and move on to the next challenge. They want to venture out in uncharted territories and even further. They essentially believe in high risk and high return.

Turn on: Productivity

Turn off: Routine

These are both different types and are suited for different kind of work. There could be more categories or even subcategories that we should think about and we should think about how to place them in the right environment. The configurations that mostly fail are:

* A survivor in a fast track team that’s expected to deliver instant results
* A survivor boss sitting on top of a team of growth oriented employees
* A growth oriented employee in routine maintenance work

### Conclusion

I don’t see any clear black and white rules to judge whether any employee would work for a given project. But we should certainly think about his motivations more deeply when matching an employee with the project and team. A wrong employee could be a disaster and a right employee could take the project to new heights. An institution is first composed of people, so we should pay more attention to what drives these people. If he’s not driven in the right dimension, his technology expertise or his people skills are of no use in fact it could cause more harm. And if he’s focused in the right dimension, he could very easily make up for any skills he lacks.