



Simple— Or Simple-Minded?

Looking at the inspirational posters that hang on corporate walls, a reasonable question. You may find the answer disquieting.

*Teamwork.
Perseverance.
Effort.
Imagination.
Aspirations.*

Inspired yet? How about when these one-word slogans are placed below photos of sunsets and sailboats and joggers and the Statue of Liberty, set in black frames, and hung along company corridors?

Actually, eagles and trees and kayaks probably already fill your office space. For years corporations large and small have spent countless dollars on low-impact motivational tools: on "Quality First" baseball caps and key chains, "Empowerment" coffee mugs, stone paperweights inscribed "Never Never Quit," "Q" desktop-computer mouse pads, and enough black-matted posters to wallpaper the Pentagon.

"We're all pursuing the perfect motivational poster," says Richard Roessler, university professor at the University of Arkansas and co-author of *Supervision and Management: A Guide to Modifying Work Behavior* (University

of Arkansas). "It's kind of a commonsense notion that if I could just get you in the right frame of mind, you would do good things."

But no one's come up with that perfect poster. What we have instead are photos of mountain climbers above exhortations of "Achievement."

And the search has gone on for some years. "Achievement" is a long way from the colorful workplace posters of the 1920s and '30s, which asked, "Why Rob Yourself? Taking two hours to do an hour's task robs you of an hour's results," urged, "Let's Make Good—for Mother," and admonished, "Winners Never Give Up," offering the Father of our Country as a shining example ("When others lost heart and quit, Washington fought on—and won").

After decades of light use, they're back. "Motivational posters have been prevalent in the marketplace for eight to 10 years," says Bonnie Brannigan, general manager at The Executive Gallery, a catalog company that sells a range of workplace products. "The

posters provide atmosphere, something to digest, something to chew on. And they're graphically pleasant to look at."

But do they *work*? Do managers believe that these posters get employees in an *achievement* frame of mind? Many onlookers are doubtful.

"These are gimmicky attempts to fill the void where effective management doesn't exist," says Alfie Kohn, author of *Punished by Rewards* (Houghton Mifflin). "My guess is that companies buy them because, though nobody expects much of them, they're cheap compared to what it takes to remake a workplace. And they fit nicely into an outmoded concept of trying to motivate behavior."

"Managers are trying to take short cuts," agrees Charles Garfield, CEO of Oakland, Calif.-based Charles Garfield Group and author of *Peak Performers: The New Heroes of American Business* (Avon). "They actually believe that these pump-up toys work."

"The slogans don't have much meaning to people, because they're so platitudinous," says Warren Bennis, distinguished professor of business administration at the University of Southern California and author of *On Becoming a Leader* (Addison-Wesley). "I think

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they're a demotivator. The critical issue is whether you reward the behavior that's on the posters or ignore it—or even reward the opposite behavior. If you don't reward it, what you get is people who are cynical, calloused toward this kind of communication, and catatonic. The only reason some of these statements exist is to help the Lucite industry."

Even those less dismissive don't view too favorably the motivational tools that one leading retailer dubs "successories."

"The pictures don't do it alone," says Thomas "Rod" McVeigh, HR director of Minolta Corp. "They might, on a rare occasion, be what was needed at a weak moment, but in general they won't raise productivity or increase risk taking or any other grand goal they profess. What they are is one more message from management to the workers. The company has to put something on the walls, so the management's decision to pick this message is relevant. If this message is contradicted by other words and actions by managers, then it is more than meaningless—it is cynical and manipulative. Employees will

snicker when it goes up and it can be a sore subject as long as it stays up. In the worst cases, comments making fun will be scribbled on the corners of the poster."

In fact, counterproductivity is a serious concern, one that's probably too rarely taken into account. For instance, as part of a recent \$20,000 poster order, the San Francisco-based Fritz Cos. sent to each of its 311 offices a set of four posters, including such favorites as "Do It Right the First Time," "Pay Attention to Details," and "Attitude Is Everything." Managers and employees are less than unambiguously enthusiastic.

"I haven't put them up yet," says Kate Starritt, general office manager of corporate finance at Fritz. "Although they're meant to be inspirational, my people have not taken them quite that way. We work 12-hour, 14-hour shifts and weekends; our workload has more than doubled in the last few years. They see these posters as an implication that they're not doing a good job. They're not so much resentful as disappointed: They had hoped that upper management recognized that they were doing it right.

"Ultimately, I'll hang the posters, but I'll wait until we go back to 10-hour days," she continues. "I mean, they *are* inspirational—it's what they are inspiring people to do that worries me."

Visual Reinforcement

Why do so many CEOs approve expenditures on these things? And make no mistake—plenty sign off. Successories Direct Marketing, one of several catalog companies that sell motivational items, projects \$52 million in sales this year, up from \$4 million five years ago.

Some of those sales are to unlikely customers: Southwest Airlines Co., renowned for its fun, participatory work environment, recently bought \$38,000 worth of posters from Successories. "These are messages that are always of benefit," says Rita Bailey, director of Southwest's University for People. "They're visual reinforcement."

But, she points out, the company doesn't use the posters as part of any formal program. "It's a subliminal thing," she says. "We don't point to a poster and say, 'OK, we're going to talk about *risk*.' Either people notice or they don't. If not, at least the posters are colorful."

According to the field's top consultants and authors, people definitely *don't* notice, at least in the desired way. In fact, it's tough to find an authority on employee motivation who doesn't scoff at the suggestion that posters urging "Enthusiasm" or "Success" might foster anything but skepticism.

"This is hardly a substitute for real motivation," Garfield says. "Companies are not will-

ing to understand what actually motivates people. There's probably not a company in America that spends as much time trying to understand the mobilization and motivation of the human resource as it does trying to understand technology, finance, or marketing.

"Imagine if they tried to teach you or I technology by giving us a plaque. It'd be ludicrous."

From Motivation to Self-Help

Hardly anyone could object to the messages on most of the posters and plaques, which typically present a single imperative thought ("Teamwork," "Effort," "Quality," "Opportunity," "Vision," "Risk") over a colorful, sometimes-related photo (rowing teams, eagles, jets in formation, lone runners, eagles, mountains, sailboats, eagles), with an ominously cheerful homily in smaller print ("Success is mastery over fear," "Superior service is always the first and last thing a customer will remember").

"There's nothing at all wrong with capturing a deep truth about human productivity and expressing it in a poster," Garfield says. "Einstein made a comment that if you can't say it simply you don't understand it well enough. So saying something simply and putting it on a poster may be a good first step."

But frequently there's no second step on the company's part. Too many HR departments buy posters and paperweights without further thought and concrete follow-through, leaving employees apathetic at best and cynical at worst. Successories corporate sales manager Don Pesceone guesses that fully half of his customers don't use the products effectively. "You can't just slap a lithograph on the wall and think you're fixing the company," he says. "If you're going to be a Total Quality Management company, you've got to do it!"

The Executive Gallery's Brannigan agrees: "Obviously, it's not our intent to be *the* form of management," she says. "It would become the ultimate irony if that happened, because then management wouldn't be practicing what it's preaching. The posters should be an adjunct to a complete motivational program."

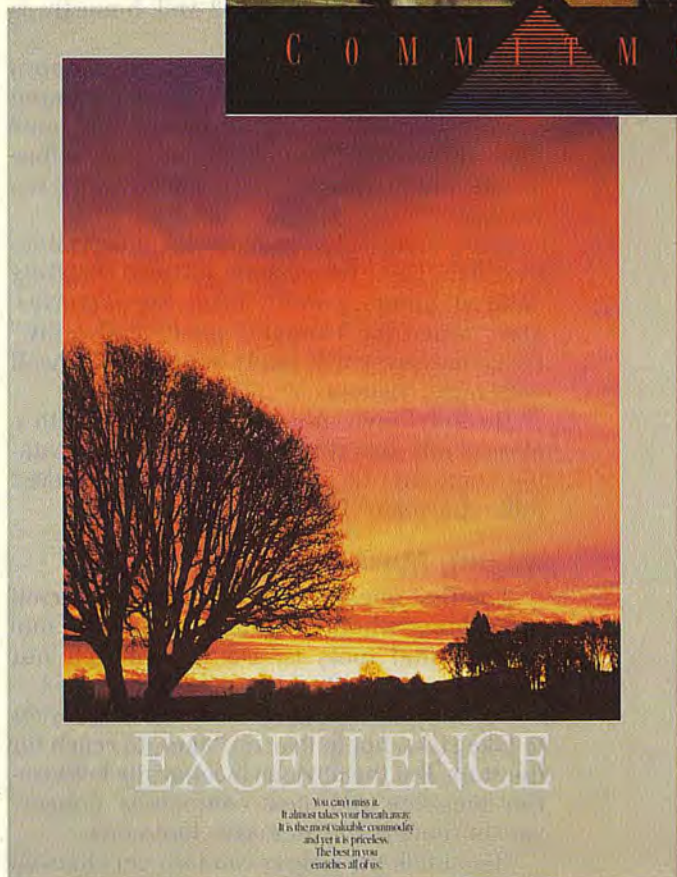
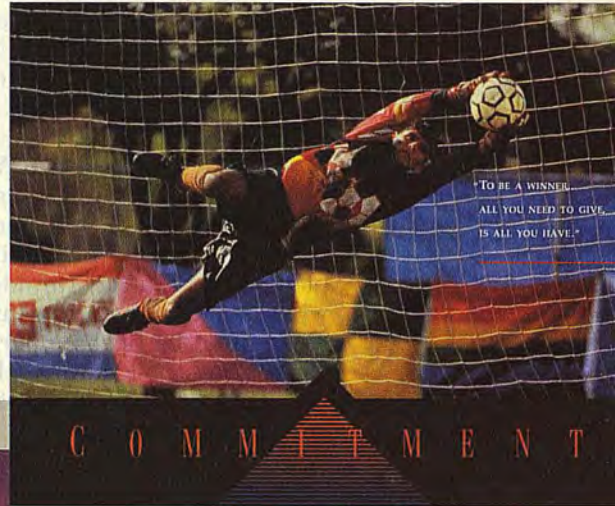
Without reinforcement, even signs and posters with specific messages ("Wear Your Safety Helmet at All Times") vanish from sight rapidly, says Richard Roessler. "I think probably what happens is an initial paying attention followed by a steady decline in the effectiveness of those things," he says. "If you don't follow up a reminder in a tangible way, people are simply not going to pay attention to it in the long run. If you've posted something on safe lifting or safe practices and don't follow it up, no one will see it after a while."

Garfield agrees: "When something sits there day after day, we habituate to it. We literally stop seeing it after a while."

Another problem: Many of the items are

prima facie ridiculous—"what we call Trinkets 'n' Trash," says Successories' Pesceone with unusual candor.

Take Successories' Etched in Stone series: two-pound stone paperweights emblazoned with "Whether you think you can or you can't you're right" or "Never never quit." The stones, which the company dubs "desktop motivators," make "wonderful conversation starters for friends and visitors alike." I dare you: Start a conversation based on "Whether you think you can or you can't



you're right." (Pesceone dubs the paperweights "*Pet Sematary* gravestones" and notes that they're made of molded shavings from headstones. "I'm just horrified by them," he says. "People love them, and *I don't know why.*")

The posters' messages are frequently undermined by incongruous photos (a snow-covered tree labeled "Teamwork," horses under "Attitude") and are sometimes so vague ("Risk," "Possibilities") that it's next to

impossible to act on the suggestion. "If the message is too abstract to be clear," Garfield agrees, "then it doesn't have any motivating power at all."

Some posters skip motivation altogether and go straight to self-help. "It takes both rain and sunshine to make a rainbow," reads the caption under a dainty Successories shot of a rainbow. (The message, perhaps: Don't fret over mistakes. Hardly a TQM attitude.)

Brannigan is reluctant to dub any Executive Gallery products "silly" but notes, "Some are certainly corny. We have a rug that says, 'Step Forward ... New Ideas Are Welcome Here!'"

A few items, closely considered, leave the viewer confused as to what action to take. Upon being presented with an individual plaque that reads, "Attitude Is Everything," what should an employee think: Is his attitude so bad that he needs a perpetual reminder? Or is it so good that he should feel proud every time he sees the sign? And, honestly, is attitude really *everything*?

The American Society for Quality Control paperweight that reads, "Winners surround themselves with other winners" presents other difficulties: Should an employee refuse to eat lunch with her underperforming co-workers?

A few items may even be counterproductive: The CEO who hands visitors "brightly colored 'quote notes'" from Successories' glass "Food for Thought" jar ("Really silly," Pesceone says) will likely soon find himself with fewer visitors.

He may have more luck reaching into a glass candy dish (from the SuccessTools catalog company) to distribute gold-foil-covered milk-chocolate "Quality" coins.

Mixing Messages

The first question you should ask yourself in deciding whether to take the plunge into motivational tools is: Do they match our corporate culture?

For instance, posters often urge employees to take risks, not to fear mistakes, to reach for the stars. But the obvious incongruity between this message and most companies' conservatism renders the messages ludicrous.

"I do think the posters can have an effect on employees' tendency toward leadership: a negative effect," says Warren Bennis. "There's almost always a disconnect between the company's actual practices and policies and what is written on these grandiloquent plaques. Almost all companies say, 'We are risk-prone.' But make one mistake, and it's off with your head."

(In his new book *The Dilbert Principle* [HarperBusiness], author/cartoonist Scott Adams lists "We reward risk-takers" under the heading "Great Lies of Management.")

"If the poster says 'Risk and Experiment,'

but the company's message is: 'Don't lose a dime of the company's money,' which do you think you're going to follow?" says Charles Garfield. "If your work environment contradicts the insight of the poster or the plaque, you're going to go in the direction of your work environment."

Indeed, the people who need "Risk" posters are, more than likely, the executives who buy them for their subordinates. Be honest: Whose office wall should feature The Executive Gallery's "Can Do' Winning Attitudes" framed poster, which lists "Can Do" attitudes ("We can make it work," "We're in touch with our customers") on one side, "Can't" ("Our vendors won't go for it," "Our company is the wrong size") on the other? Your sales reps'? Or yours?

And would you buy this for yourself?

"That's the real question," says Alfie Kohn. "Do the people in managerial positions who buy this garbage see themselves as capable of being influenced by them? My guess is no, but they expect it to influence the People Down There."

So what *does* motivate people? That's the wrong question, says Florida International University professor of business Gary Dessler, author of *Winning Commitment: How Ten Top Companies Get and Keep a Committed Workforce* (McGraw-Hill). "Companies ought to stop thinking about motivating their employees and start talking about commitment, and that means synthesizing the goals of the company and the goals of the employees," he says.

That means treating employees like partners. It means adequate pay, job security, promotional opportunities, educational opportunities, open communication—all increasingly rare in the nobody-counts-but-shareholders Al Dunlap era.

"So many jobs these days require self-discipline and autonomy that unless you turn on people's gyroscopes, you're not going to get innovative, creative work from them," Dessler says. "Doing that requires going beyond simplistic incentive plans; you have to address the whole person. It's no longer enough to give people a couple of carrots. You need to do more than motivate people for short bursts of work."

Kohn agrees: "First of all, you can't motivate other people," he says. "All you can do is create a system and a culture that allow people's desire to do good work to flourish. The attempt to make other people motivated is presumptuous and bound to fail. And if you *could* motivate people, you certainly couldn't do it through cutesy slogans.

"These poster companies have tried to co-opt the teachings of the quality movement—even though one of [W. Edwards] Deming's 14 points was to *eliminate* slogans. That whirring you hear in the background is Deming spinning in his grave." ■