

This story starts with an 8th grade basketball game in Ames. The boys, who just finished playing a game, including my son Ben, were together and cheering for their teammates who were starting another. We couldn't stay for the entire 2nd game, but the cheering we heard from the boys during the first half was loud, positive and fun to listen to.

Before I left, I went to go compliment the boys and their cheering, encouraging them to keep it going for the rest of the game. I passed a parent and mentioned that I thought the boys were doing a great job. She suggested that we invite them to the varsity boys and girls basketball games the following Friday night. As an incentive to be there, she said that there would be free pizza for any boy that showed up and cheered like they were doing for their classmates. When I mentioned it to the new found cheering section, they got really excited.

Throughout the rest of the week, we kept promoting the 8th grade cheering section. The other parent talked to the high school athletic director and got free admission for any 8th grade boy basketball player to that game. The free pizza worked out and basketball players from both Ankeny and Ankeny Centennial were coming together to cheer on the varsity teams. It was going to be a great experiment to see if a) any of the boys would actually show up and b) if they would cheer with the same enthusiasm they did for their classmates.

Because we needed a head count to order the right amount of pizza, we asked the 8th grade coaches to help us out. The initial head count of those boys coming was 101, which was an incredible number, especially if they all showed up. I talked with the athletic director and we set up a special section for the 8th graders, right next to the high school students and their cheering section. About 80 boys showed up and ate pizza at halftime of the girls game and cheered and cheered and cheered.

When I sat down to write this story, I thought about what motivates people. In the case of those 8th grade boys, I think it came down to two main things; free pizza and several people complimenting them on their positive actions where they were having fun. Throw in the free admission and I think you have a perfect combination where good things happened. What motivates your employees? The first guess from a lot of people is that money is a primary motivator.

Psychologists will disagree with each other on that theory. Some have said that pay is the primary motivator, however more recent theories have said that while pay is important, many other factors play into worker satisfaction and more importantly their job satisfaction and productivity. The culture of the company where people are recognized and rewarded for their ideas is important. A place where they receive proactive and regular communication and are felt appreciated for the work they do.

How does your company measure up? Are your co-workers receiving the right motivation, recognition and rewards? There are small, inexpensive measures that can help improve motivation and productivity in every company and I challenge you to find at least one new idea to try.

The story ends with wins for both the boys and girls varsity teams. My other son Ted plays for the varsity and he told us later that the team could hear the 8th graders and their cheering, and it helped them to the victory. Still another form of motivation!

Small Business Today is a bi-weekly feature written by Tom Friedman, market president of First National Bank, Ames-Ankeny.