

Unlocking the Potential of Your



Employees

The Not-So-Secret Secrets of Motivational Leadership



The working conditions couldn't have been more deplorable. Toil from dawn until dusk in unbearably hot, steamy weather with no electricity, no fresh water, no place to take a break. Do punishing physical labor with inadequate tools and even less information. Eat peanut butter, cheese from a tube, apples, and candy bars for breakfast, lunch, and dinner for three days. Sleep – if that was possible – in the back of a cramped RV with no air conditioning, then get up and do it all again. Perhaps worst of all, the assignment came without warning late on a Friday afternoon when most people were looking forward to the weekend. Despite these conditions, the team worked with a level of focused and committed energy, cooperation, and enthusiasm that produced a small miracle.

Many civil servants will recognize this scenario as a disaster recovery effort, which it was (the episode transpired in the wake of Hurricane Ivan last fall in northern Florida). But this wasn't a team of civil servants. It was a group of six high-level managers accustomed to working in nice offices in a large organization. They had mobilized overnight from several cities nationwide to help a colleague whose home had been severely damaged.

Admittedly, it is relatively easy to be motivated to work hard in such extraordinary circumstances. Generating that same kind of enthusiasm is more challenging in typical workday situations that lack life or death urgency. However, the good news is that skillful leadership can replicate in the workplace many of the elements that produce the powerful motivation that emerges in extraordinary situations. Managers who understand these elements are those whose work groups are productive and engaged in all situations. Managers who don't understand them tend to attribute lack of desired results to "bad attitude" or "lack of motivation" or to other conditions they believe are out of their ability to influence. So just what is it that successful managers understand about motivating others?

Leadership is about executing strategy through others. Arguably, the most demanding aspect of the job of leadership is to get people to do what they are expected to do, and to do it well and with sufficient motivation to surmount the obstacles encountered along the way. Successful execution begins with understanding why people do what they do. Managers whose staffs work with commitment tend to understand that most people have a level of intrinsic motivation that must be sustained. According to Lionel Tiger, a professor at Rutgers University, "Leaders often forget that people arrive on the scene predisposed to doing a good job. People, like young baseball players, are hard-wired to want to be sent into the game." When managers are unaware of this reality, they often unwittingly engage in practices that actually drain employees of the motivation they brought with them to the job. This article offers some insights into how to obtain and sustain employee commitment.

BY LYNN A. MOLINE

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF MOTIVATION

Just exactly why motivation occurs and how leaders and organizations influence it has been the subject of decades of evolving analysis. Perhaps the earliest modern theorist on human motivation was Freud, who argued that people are basically lazy and must be coerced to work. Indeed, it is reported that an early 20th century training manual for U.S. Army officers warned that “enlisted men are cunning and stupid and not to be trusted.” But Freud’s theory has long been discounted, and common sense alone says that if it were true, managers would spend all of their time watching people who refuse to cooperate.

In the 1950s, psychologist Abraham Maslow developed his famous “hierarchy of needs” that he theorized must be met, more or less in sequence, before people are able to ascend to the next higher level. Often depicted as a pyramid, the needs begin with basic physiological requirements and move on to needs for safety, belonging, and esteem. At the top of the pyramid is self-actualization, a state of having reached full potential where work is done for the joy of self-fulfillment. While this theory is incomplete in many ways – for example, it doesn’t readily explain why the executive team members put themselves in harm’s way and tolerated miserable working conditions to help their colleague after the hurricane – it is still useful because it suggests that people become distracted by the quest for more basic needs if certain foundations are not in place. For example, employees who feel unappreciated and undervalued (an unfulfilled need for esteem) will often not feel satisfied at work and thus may not work to their full potential.

Later, Frederick Herzberg developed a theory that “satisfiers” and “dissatisfiers” in the workplace respectively create and erode motivation. David McClellan hypothesized that people are motivated by achievement, power, and affiliation. All of these theories offer bits of useful insight into human motivation, but none is comprehensive enough to fully define the range of factors that governs, and influences, human behavior in the workplace.

CONTEMPORARY VIEWS OF MOTIVATION

Contemporary students of human motivation believe that no simple “theory of everything” exists to account for all of the behaviors of all of the people. One thing that is clear, however, is that a complex interplay of intrinsic factors like personality, self-percep-



tion, emotional development, and cognition, and extrinsic factors like culture, the situation, and organizational practices, all play roles in workplace performance. If just one generalization can be drawn from recent study and experience, it is that people will contribute more if they are treated as respected, valued adults who have individual motives, abilities, and preferences.

In addition, researchers generally agree on three additional observations about human behavior as it relates to motivation:

- *Managers or others can’t really motivate people.* Since motivation comes from within, managers can only create an environment that sustains motivation and eliminate factors that degrade it.
- *People are motivated by self-interest.* This does not necessarily mean that humans are selfish. Rather, it means that people choose actions that yield some sort of benefit for themselves or that support their interests. Managers can attempt to rationalize, cajole, make promises, and even threaten in order to persuade people to perform as requested. But in the end, the job is easier when an employee can see how the organization’s goals align in some way with his or her goals and aspirations.
- *Individual people are motivated by different things.* While a few generalizations can be made about factors that sustain motivation for most people, as will be described later in this article, individuals are moved by different things, based on personality, experience, life circumstances, and other conditions and characteristics. Effective managers learn what individual employees value – it may be things like security, autonomy, competence, visibility, a promotion, extra time off, or any of dozens of other factors – and help employees see how their own needs can be met by committing wholeheartedly to the job.

TO SUSTAIN MOTIVATION, ELIMINATE DE-MOTIVATORS

Based on these views about motivation and on the generalization that people who are treated respectfully will be productive, it stands to reason that leaders should make it their business to remove impediments to motivation. Too often, organizations and managers make it difficult for even the best employees to maintain their intrinsic motivation. Employees in all types of organizations are routinely treated in ways that are anything but adult and

respectful. In fact, some workplace practices actually encourage passive, dependent behavior that robs people of self-respect, erodes the confidence required for consistent high performance, and induces a kind of organizationally sanctioned mediocrity. As a puzzled manager in an organization marked by these characteristics wondered, “How can my employees, who can’t seem to do anything without my say-so, be the same people who manage household budgets, organize their kids’ soccer leagues, and run fundraisers for their churches?”

A case in point is the story of an intelligent, highly skilled craft laborer who has been employed by a large city for more than 25 years. This man says he learned long ago to do exactly what his boss instructs, no more and no less. He explains that when he first began his job, he put extra effort into every project, suggested improvements, and sometimes did more than he was asked to do. In most cases, he says, he was not thanked for his effort and his recommendations went virtually ignored. In some cases, he was actually reprimanded for taking unapproved initiative and being “too self-directed.”

These messages, he says, taught him what was expected. So for more than 25 years he has been faithfully reporting to work every day but never doing anything other than what he is explicitly directed to do. If what he is asked to do will actually result in errors, he complies anyway because his boss doesn’t like to be questioned. “It’s just easier that way,” he explains. “If things go wrong, my boss takes the heat and he can’t come back at me for it because I was following his orders.” Naturally, not all employees will respond in this way to such treatment. But most people will certainly be discouraged from committing as deeply to their work as they would have under different circumstances.

De-motivators like the ones described in this man’s story come in many guises, ranging from the practice of ignoring people and their suggestions to micromanaging projects and denying decision making authority. They come in the forms of withholding feedback and compliments, failure to acknowledge concerns, and reluctance to address and correct the poor work performance of others. They show up as giving people ambiguous, nonnegotiable, or unreasonable goals; as not sharing information; as not allowing people

to develop their skills, apply their abilities, and learn. Fortunately, most or all of these de-motivators can be eliminated simply by adopting tried and true good management practices that every leader can use to be more successful at implementing through others.

ANATOMY OF A MOTIVATED, HIGH-PERFORMING TEAM

But before explicitly describing these management practices, consider again the experiences of the executives who transformed themselves into a high-performing hurricane disaster relief team. Why were they motivated to work with such dedication and enthusiasm? Not surprisingly, most of the factors that tend to nurture motivation in the workplace were present for those three days in Florida.

Does Money Motivate?

Money is an unreliable performance motivator unless it is an exceptionally large amount or if a large percentage of total income is directly proportional to effort, as in sales commissions. Herzberg and others suggest that when compensation is perceived as being inadequate or unfair it can de-motivate people and contribute to decisions to leave an employer. However, pay that is perceived as being fair and adequate will not motivate most people, and if it does, the effect has short duration. Few employees are willing to work harder for the promise of a raise or a bonus, unless the amount is substantial. Even fewer are willing to continue working hard simply because they already have received a raise or bonus. Factors other than money are more reliable for sustaining motivation.

First of all, the executives understood what had to be done. In workplace terminology, their goal was clear and unambiguous. Additionally, they recognized that they were doing something important and purposeful. They knew why the goal existed and they knew the consequences of meeting or not meeting it.

Secondly, every individual’s contributions were critically needed throughout the effort; everyone participated fully. Furthermore, there was no political jockeying about who would play what role and what job belonged to whom. People simply did what was necessary when it was necessary. Some specialization occurred, based on skills, interest, or circumstance, but everyone felt ownership for the entire project and worked together. The executives also gave each other feedback. They reported that they found themselves complimenting and thanking each other and making helpful suggestions.

Finally, the team members set their own work objectives, determined the order in which to tackle the many tasks involved in the cleanup, and had full autonomy to decide how they would carry out the work.

MANAGERIAL LEADERSHIP PRACTICES THAT SUSTAIN MOTIVATION

Managers who can replicate these conditions through good man-

agement are those whose employees work with commitment and produce consistently excellent results. Effective managerial leadership – the kind that sustains motivation and produces desired results – is a daily process that consists of four key activities (Exhibit 1):



Communicating expectations. In the workplace, the purpose, goals, and performance expectations for any given project are seldom as obvious as they were for the hurricane relief team. So effective managers must expend a good deal of energy communicating *what* needs to be done, *why* it needs to be done, and the *consequences* that will follow actions. When people know why a job is important and how their efforts impact and contribute to outcomes, they will almost always be willing to perform. When communicating expectations, effective managers often invite people to collaborate with them to set goals because people tend to buy in to what they help create.

Delegating “how” decisions. Employees who feel responsible and accountable for their performance are almost always more committed to what they are doing. Instead of specifying exactly *how* a job should be done, effective managers concentrate on explaining *what* needs to be done, leaving employees to make as many decisions as possible about how to do it. Of course, when managers delegate, they must ensure that the employees have the skills, competence, tools, and information required to perform the task. These managers also recognize that many people want to learn and improve their skills, so delegating tasks that stretch and expand people’s abilities can both sustain individual motivation and strengthen the composite capabilities of an entire staff.

Observing performance and providing frequent feedback.

Lack of feedback is one of the most frequently cited complaints employees make about their work conditions. People want and need to know how they are doing. So effective managers pay attention to employees and get to know them, noting strengths, interests, aspirations, and improvement opportunities. They also give employees immediate feedback when they see the need for corrective action or performance coaching. Feedback and coaching should be based on *observable work performance* and should be delivered in an objective way that avoids blame or shame and that demonstrates support for and confidence in the individual.

Recognizing performance. A manager once explained that he didn’t praise employees because he believed doing so would create a sense of perfection and indolence. Another manager said she resented complimenting people for doing what they get paid to do. Contrary to what these managers believe, a sincere, deserved compliment for good performance goes a long way toward demonstrating respect and appreciation for people, sustaining their intrinsic motivation, and reinforcing desired performance. Compliments are never gratuitous or patronizing when they praise *specific performance* and explain *why the performance is appreciated*.

THE HUMAN TOUCH

The bottom line is that the key to keeping people motivated at work is not some arcane secret, nor is it an especially difficult skill to master. It simply requires treating employees like trusted, valued adults and using management practices that clarify goals and expectations and provide people with autonomy, feedback, and appreciation. One other element is required, however, and that is that leaders themselves demonstrate enthusiasm and the human touch. They must maintain their own energy and dedication to their jobs and their people. They must be willing to relinquish some control and authority. They must be empathetic to the impact of workplace demands on their people. And most importantly, they must be human enough to stop pretending to know everything and courageous enough to apologize when they make mistakes. These behaviors alone will generate a level of employee commitment that no amount of money can buy. ■

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