

Growing Greatness®:

Series of Articles to Cultivate Truly Outstanding Leaders

Motivating and Retaining Top Talent

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Today's workplace is a fast-paced and challenging environment. Global competition and rapidly changing technology have resulted in new skill requirements and more complex jobs with fewer qualified people to fill them. Faced with a shrinking talent pool and more "me-focused" employees, companies are finding it increasingly difficult to attract, motivate, and retain top talent. The "old ways" of leading and motivating just don't work anymore. Effective leaders are those who learn how to create an environment in which people thrive and are committed to helping their organizations succeed.

Motivation is one of the primary concerns and challenges facing today's leaders. You may ask yourself, "Why do I need to know about motivation? If people aren't motivated, there's not much I can do about it."

Why Do You Need to Know About Motivation?

1. Your employees are the key to your successful business.
2. Motivation affects employee performance that affects organizational objectives.
3. Satisfied employees lead to satisfied customers.
4. Motivated employees make your job easier.

Criteria for Success

To be a successful leader/motivator you must first understand that you cannot motivate anyone. You can only create an environment that encourages and promotes the employee's self motivation. As Dwight Eisenhower once said, "Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it." The challenge is to give the person a reason to want to do it because doing it will satisfy a need he or she has. You have to tune in to the other person's need, not yours.

Another important thing to keep in mind is that you are the critical component in the motivation process. Your actions set the tone. Many managers embrace the "carrot-on-the-stick" approach to motivating employees. These practices take the form of incentive programs, promises of rewards, and bonuses. Others employ the symbolic "whip" or "club" by emphasizing the negative results of their behavior. For example, a manager might say, "If you don't start getting to work on time, you'll be fired" or "You'll never get ahead if you continue to make these kinds of mistakes." The problem with these methods is that they are short-term. These "quick fixes" create no permanent behavior change.

Do you really encourage people and bring out the best in them or do you manage them through intimidation and threats? What motivation methods have you tried? Did they work? If so, for how long?

Watch Out For...

There is no quick fix. Changing employee behavior takes time and patience. You will find that what works well for one person may not work for another. You may have to use "trial and error" until you identify and match the right methods to the appropriate people.

You also may have to face the unpleasant truth that no matter what you do, you might have some employees who refuse to change their behavior. If that is the case, you will have to “bite the bullet” and ask them to leave. It’s very demotivating to other employees to keep someone on who will not cooperate and perform according to agreed-upon expectations.

So how do you find out what motivates your employees? The best way is to talk to your employees and really listen to them. They will let you know indirectly or sometimes even directly what’s important to them. For example, if you have an employee who frequently asks you, “How am I doing?” or “Did you like the way I handled that situation?” it’s a good indication that particular employee wants and needs recognition.

Creating an Environment

If you want to become an effective leader and motivator, use the following techniques to create an environment in which people want to work:

1. Use appropriate methods of reinforcement. Rewards should be tied directly to performance. If you have determined that delivering quality service is important, then the employee’s performance in delivering that service should be rewarded. For example, the employee who “goes the extra mile” by staying late (without extra pay) to help a customer with a problem should be acknowledged and rewarded accordingly. It’s also important to dispense reinforcement as soon as possible after the desired performance.

2. Provide people with flexibility and choice. Whenever possible, give employees a chance to make decisions - particularly when the decisions affect them in some way. Choice and the personal commitment that results are essential to motivation. People who are not given the opportunity to choose for themselves tend to become passive and lethargic. For example, if you are thinking of remodeling or redesigning the employee work area, give the employees the guidelines or parameters, then allow them to design the area themselves.

3. Provide support when it is needed. One key characteristic of the achievement-oriented person is the willingness to use help when it is needed. Employees should be encouraged to ask for support and assistance; otherwise, they will become frustrated. Asking for help should never be considered a sign of weakness; it should be considered a sign of strength.

When an employee comes to you for help, be careful not to turn him or her off with comments such as “You still don’t know how to do that? I thought I explained it to you.” Instead, ask, “Tell me where you are having problems. What can I clear up for you?”

4. Encourage employees to set their own goals and objectives. Let them participate actively in the goal-setting process. People tend to know their own capabilities and limitations. Also, personal goal setting results in a commitment to goal accomplishment. In setting sales goals, for example, ask your sales person to come up with a realistic monthly goal and a plan to reach that number.

5. Demonstrate to employees how their tasks relate to personal and organizational goals. Routine work can result in passivity and boredom unless employees are aware of how the routine tasks contribute to their own development and the success of the organization. Point out how their task fits into the big picture. A few extra minutes can increase productivity tremendously.

6. Clarify your expectations and make sure that employees understand them.

Regardless of the size of your organization, you should have a job description for every position, clearly outlining qualifications and responsibilities. Also identify the expected standards of performance. For example, if you expect the telephone to be answered within three rings, say so. Employees are not mind readers. You cannot assume that just because they have experience in doing the job, they know what you specifically expect of them in that position.

7. Have a flexible management style. Many managers pride themselves on treating everyone the same. This misconception can be dangerous. Employees are individuals with individual needs. You need to treat everyone fairly but not

necessarily the same. A flexible management style also means that you vary your approach not only to the individual but also to the situation. An employee who is new to the job will need more direction than a five-year veteran. However, if the veteran employee is given a new task or responsibility, that person may need more direction in that particular situation.

How would you characterize your management style? Do you use the same approach in every situation? Think about situations or people that would require you to modify your style accordingly.

8. Provide immediate and relevant feedback that will help employees improve their performance in the future. Feedback is most effective when it follows performance. Feedback should be relevant to the task and should let employees know how they might improve their performance at the task. Never give negative feedback without providing informational feedback. Keep in mind that feedback should be both positive and negative. Employees often complain that the only time they receive feedback is when they do something wrong. Practice catching people doing something right and tell them about it. The feedback also must be specific. Just telling someone that they're doing a good job and "keep up the good work" is of no help. It is much more effective and meaningful to say something like, "John, I liked the way you handled that difficult customer. You showed a great deal of restraint and professionalism by not raising your voice or losing control."

9. Recognize and help eliminate barriers to individual achievement. Many people who are labeled "failures" or "incompetents" are simply being hindered by relatively minor obstacles that managers have not recognized. The tragedy is that after a while, the employee may begin to accept the failure label as a fact. Does the employee have the knowledge and skills to do the job? If not, it's your job to provide him or her with the necessary training. Does the person have the appropriate tools or technology? If not, get it. Make sure people have the training, information, tools, and equipment to do the job.

10. Exhibit confidence in employees. There is a great deal of research to support the contention that people who are expected to achieve will do so more frequently than others. Saying to the employee, "I know this new procedure may be uncomfortable and maybe even difficult for you at first, but I know you will be able to make the

adjustment” is more effective than “Give it a try. If you can’t get the hang of it, we’ll have to see what we can do.” The latter statement has conveyed the subtle message that you expect the person to fail.

11. Establish a climate of trust and open communication. Productivity is highest in organizations that encourage openness and trust. Trust and openness are created by the way we communicate. Do you use phrases that build people and get things started or ones that destroy ideas and chloroform creative thinking? Look at the following phrases. Which do you use more frequently?

Killer phrases

- Yes, but...
- We don’t have the time.
- It’s not in the budget.
- We’ve tried that before.

Igniter phrases

- I’m glad you brought that up.
- Good work!
- You’re on the right track.
- I never thought of that.
- I’m very pleased with what you’ve done.

12. Be careful not to give mixed messages. People receive mixed messages when the verbal and nonverbal actions are not communicating the same message. The manager who says, “I’m listening” and continues to look through papers on his or her desk is communicating that he or she really isn’t interested in what the employee has to say.

13. Point out improvement in performance, no matter how small. This is particularly important when employees are beginning work on new tasks. In getting employees to improve performance, frequent encouragement can be useful; however, it should be reduced as the employee becomes more confident and proficient.

14. Demonstrate your own motivation through behavior and attitude. Nothing turns people off faster than a manager who doesn't practice what he or she preaches. Be a role model. If you expect people to be on time, then you must make sure you are on time, too. If you expect employees to treat customers with courtesy and respect, you should treat the employees the same way. If you expect employees to get additional training to upgrade their knowledge and skills, you should be attending workshops and seminars to fine-tune your management skills as well.

Think about any areas where you might not be modeling the appropriate behavior. What can you do differently?

Remember that motivation is something that comes from within the individual to prompt or incite action. Motivation is a function of individual will. People do things because the outcome is appealing to them and serves as an incentive. It is your job to create the environment in which your employees are motivated to succeed.

About the Author

Karen Lawson, PhD, CSP, is an international consultant, executive coach, speaker, and author. She has built a successful organization and management development consulting firm working with Fortune 500 companies as well as small businesses. Dr. Lawson specializes in cultivating outstanding leaders who enable their organizations to outperform the competition. For a complete list of her products and services, contact Lawson Consulting Group, Inc. at 215-368-9465 or at www.LawsonCG.com.

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