Motivation

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In today's turbulent, often chaotic environment, it is important for organisational success to motivate employees to use their full talents. Yet in spite of the myriad of theories and practices available to draw on, managers often view motivation as something of a mystery to which there is no ready solution. In part this is because individuals are motivated by different things and in different ways. It is also because these are times when delayering and the flattening of hierarchies can create insecurity and uncertainty, and lower staff morale. There are moreover, more staff who are on limited-term contracts or work part-time, and who are usually especially hard to motivate.

Definition of motivation

"The heart of motivation is to give people what they really want most from work. The more you are able to provide what they want, the more you should expect what you really want, namely: productivity, quality and service." (Dell)

Advantages of motivating people

With a positive motivation philosophy and practice in place, productivity, quality and service should improve because motivation helps people towards:

- achieving goals
- gaining a positive perspective
- creating the power to change
- building self-esteem and capability
- managing their development and helping others.

Disadvantages of motivation

There are no real disadvantages of successfully motivating employees, but there are many barriers to be overcome.

Barriers may include unaware or absent managers, inadequate buildings, out of date equipment and entrenched attitudes such as:

- "we don't get paid any extra to work harder"
- "we've always done it this way in the past"
- "our bosses don't have a clue what we do"
- "it doesn't say that in my job description"
- "I'll get away with as little as possible without getting the sack".

Such views will take persuasion, perseverance and the proof of experience to break down.

Motivation action checklist

1. Read the gurus

Familiarise yourself with Herzberg's hygiene theory, McGregor's X and Y theories and Maslow's hierarchy of needs. Although these theories date back some years, they are still valid today. A basic understanding of their main principles can be gained from book or the internet and will be invaluable for building a climate of honesty, openness and trust.

2. What motivates you?

Determine which factors are important to you in your working life and how they interact. What has motivated you and demotivated you in the past? What motivates your family and friends? Is money really a powerful motivator? Real responsibility, positive support when things go wrong, satisfying a need for meaning, belonging and developing can all be equally, or even more, important.

Understand the differences between real, longer-term motivators and short-term spurs. If you do not find a new tea machine in the canteen, holiday entitlements or even private health care as a motivator then perhaps your people won't either.

3. Find out what people want most from their jobs

People may want more status, more pay, better working conditions, and a choice of fringe benefits. But find out in performance appraisals, attitude surveys and informally, what motivates them by asking them what they want most from their jobs.

Do people want, for example:

- more interesting work?
- to work for efficient bosses?
- to see the end result of their work?
- greater participation?
- greater recognition?
- greater challenge?
- more opportunities for development?

4. Walk the job

Every day, find someone doing something well and tell them so. Make sure the interest you show is genuine without going overboard or appearing to watch over shoulders. If you have ideas as to how their work could be improved, don't shout it out, but help them to find their way instead (coach them). Earn respect by setting an example; it is not necessary to be able do everything better than your staff. Make it clear what levels of support employees may expect.

5. Remove demotivators

Identify factors that demotivate staff - they may be physical (buildings, equipment), or psychological (boredom, unfairness, barriers to promotion, lack of recognition). Some of them can be dealt with quickly and easily, others require more planning and time to work through. The fact that you are concerned to find out what is wrong and do something about it, is, in itself, motivating.

6. Demonstrate support

Whether your working culture is one which penalises error and clamps down on mistakes or one which has a more tolerant view, espousing mistakes as learning opportunities, your staff will need to understand the kind and levels of support they may expect. They will need to know to what extent they can bend rules or use initiative to step outside well-trodden procedures and yet receive the support they will need. Support is often the hurdle at which motivation practice and the relationships being built can falter.

7. Be wary of cash incentives

Many will say that they are working for money; they will claim - in conversation - that their fringe benefits are an incentive. Money actually comes low down in the list of motivators (and doesn't motivate for long after a pay rise). Fringe benefits can be effective in attracting new employees but rarely motivate them to use their potential more effectively.

8. Decide on action

Having listened to staff, take steps to alter present policies and attitudes, consulting fully with staff and unions. Consider policies which affect flexible working, reward, promotion, training and development, and participation.

9. Manage change

Adopting policies is one thing, implementing them is quite another. If poor motivation is entrenched, this may suggest that the whole style of management needs to be looked at. One of the most natural of human instincts is to resist change even when it is for benefit. The way change is introduced can often be the key to success or failure through its own power to motivate or demotivate. If you:

- **tell** - instruct or deliver a monologue - this takes no account of your staff's hopes, fears or expectations
- **tell and sell** - try to persuade people - your overpowering reasons will not hold sway in the longer term if they are imposed without discussion
- **consult** - it will still become obvious if you have made up your mind anyway
- look for real **participation**, sharing the problem-solving and decision-making with those who are to implement the change, you can begin to expect commitment and ownership along with the adaptation and compromise that will occur naturally.

10. Understand learning preferences

Change involves learning. People rarely learn best by reading a book or following a course; they learn by practice and experience. Think back to how you learned to ride a bicycle, or to swim. Some people prefer to try things out first and reflect afterwards, while others find it useful to read and reflect before practising.

Honey and Mumford distinguish four basic styles of learning:

- **activists** - like to get involved in new experiences, problems or opportunities and are not too happy standing back, observing and being impartial
- **theorists** - are comfortable with concepts and theory and don't like being thrown in at the deep end without apparent purpose or reason
- **reflectors** - like to take their time and think things through; they don't like being pressured into rushing from one thing to another
- **pragmatists** - need a link between the subject matter and the job in hand and learn best when they can test things out.

As we learn with different styles, preferences and mixes of approach, your people will respond best to stimuli and suggestions which take account of the way they do things best. Trying to develop people against the grain will usually only succeed in demotivating.

11. Provide feedback

Feedback is one of the most valuable elements in the motivation cycle. Don't keep staff guessing how their developments, progress and accomplishments are shaping up. Offer comments with accuracy and care in consideration of the next steps or future targets.

Dos and don'ts for motivating staff

Do

- Recognise that you don't have all the answers.
- Take time to find out what makes others tick and show genuine care.
- Lead, encourage and guide staff, don't force them.
- Tell your staff what you think.

Don't

- Make assumptions about what drives others.
- Assume others are like you.
- Force people into things that are "good for them".
- Delegate work, but delegate responsibility.
- Neglect the need for inspiration and excitement.