



Going Back to School on Employee Motivation

By James S. Pepitone

Published in *The Alcalde - The University of Texas magazine* / May 2000

When was the last time you thought about setting your employees on fire—inspiring them to be their best—to unleash their limitless potential. Hopefully, not recently.

That's some pretty old thinking. Rah-rah speeches and gimmick rewards have a lifespan measured in minutes. Employees are now too smart for these quasimanipulative tactics that worked in years past.

Likewise, we now know better than to think that a manager alone can provide for every individual employee's motivation—an "attagirl" here and 50 bucks there. There aren't enough amateur psychology books or hours in the day to meet this challenge.

The manager's goal should be to create a motivating environment—a place to work that inspires each employee to do his or her very best every day, particularly when the manager isn't looking. The operative question is, "How can the enterprise provide employees with increasingly greater satisfaction from their work?"

Motivation is one of the principal determinants of human behavior. It stems from four natural drives that people experience: (*natural drive/goal*)

1. Achievement/success
2. Power/impact
3. Affiliation/intimacy
4. Avoidance/safety

Simply stated, people are wired to fulfill these drives and will behave in ways that further this self-interest. You can easily imagine the many ways that these can be realized or influenced through a person's work and employment experiences.

If you want a motivating organization, then create a place to work that helps people fulfill these natural drives. Absent this fulfillment, you're not going to get very much of the work potential that people have to offer.

Have you ever recognized any of the following workplace characteristics? What did you notice about employee motivation under these circumstances?

- Unclear objectives
- Lack of time and resources to do the job
- Organizational fear or intimidation
- Bureaucracy or red tape
- Constant deadline pressures and anxiety
- Conflicting goals and messages
- Lack of training and development support
- Management's failure to value employee contributions

All of these characteristics get in the way of employees fulfilling their natural drives—and rob a workplace of its potential to be motivating. You can bet that people working under these circumstances are not performing near their potential—probably more like 20 to 30 percent of it. Seriously.

When employees can't fulfill their natural drives through their work, then work becomes "just a way to make a living . . . another day, another dollar." They are forced to look elsewhere to meet their needs—idly searching the Internet, chatting excessively with other employees, doing personal business during work, etc. There's no end to the ways people can pass the time while meeting minimum acceptable performance standards. What do you think your employees could produce if they were really motivated?

If managers want to tap into employees' natural motivators, then they need to operate organizations in a way that actualizes people's innate drives. And managers need to select people who are a good fit with the workplace environment . . . people who can reasonably meet their individual drives working there.

Creating a motivating work environment is a challenge that managers have to share with employees. Managers can help employees focus on their drives in the selection decision, but then employees must take on most of the responsibility to make the situation actually meet their motivation needs. Helping employees accept self-responsibility for their own motivational needs is one of the most powerful interventions managers can make to increase an organization's potential for success.

All employees are motivated. We are naturally wired that way. The question for managers is what are their employees motivated to do while on the job. If employees are not eagerly doing their work, then their motivation is focused elsewhere. Managers need to ask them "why."

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James S. Pepitone is co-author of *Motivating Employees* (McGraw-Hill, 1999 / ISBN 0-07-071868-7 / \$14.95), which can be found at most major bookstores, or ordered online from Butterworth-Heinemann, Amazon, Barnes & Noble, Borders, or other booksellers.