

Create an environment that promotes confidence, trust and satisfaction to motivate employees

By Thad Green

Why should you care about motivating your employees? The bottom line: Managers pay a heavy price when employees have motivation problems. When high-performing employees have unresolved motivation issues, their performance either declines or they leave for another job. When poor-performing employees are not motivated to improve, they drag down results, reduce productivity among their team members and, worse, seldom leave because they have no place to go.

The crux of motivation management is to understand that employees are motivated by what they believe is going to happen, not by what managers promise will happen. Managers can motivate employees by setting in motion the three conditions required for motivation—confidence, trust and satisfaction—and by creating an environment that reinforces those conditions.

Confidence problems. When employees believe they “can’t do it,” they tend to give up. That attitude typically develops when performance expectations are unrealistic, workloads are impossibly high and training fails to keep pace with employee needs. The problem is that managers often fail to realize the seriousness of this problem because employees are afraid to tell the boss they “can’t do it” for fear that the boss will assign the duty to someone else. So, employees go through the motions, giving the appearance that everything is fine. As a result, confidence problems go largely unnoticed.

Good managers learn to recognize when an employee *says* he can do something but doesn’t mean it. For instance, if the employee responds to an assignment by saying, “If everything goes well, I’ll probably be able to ... I guess,” then clearly the employee has a confidence issue. If the employee doesn’t volunteer information, ask questions in a non-threatening way about how he plans to carry out the instructions. To ferret out confidence issues, ask:

- Do you know what is expected?
- Do you think what’s expected is attainable?
- Can you do what is being asked of you and can you do it on time?

Most importantly, managers can improve motivation by assigning work to employees that they naturally do well and that they enjoy.

Trust problems. Employees face a major motivational roadblock when they don’t believe outcomes are tied to their performance. These problems tend to be easier for managers to spot because employees usually are vocal about them. If you’re concerned about trust issues, ask the employee:

- Do you know what is being offered for good performance?
- In your opinion, have we come through on our promises in the past?
- Do you expect to get what is offered?
- What do you expect to get if you do a good job?
- What do you expect to happen if you perform poorly?

Trust problems cannot be corrected quickly, and it takes courage for managers to give employees what their performance deserves. It may be easy to reward the high performers, but it is sometimes uncomfortable to withhold rewards when people perform poorly. It is particularly difficult when the poor-performing employee is either an outspoken troublemaker or a loyal, dedicated and hard-working employee. But not giving employees what their performance deserves sends a crippling message to the underperforming employee—as well as his teammates who learn they don't have to perform to get what they want.

Managers also make the mistake of giving too much trust. Managers who delegate duties to employees and then never follow up may think they are doing the right thing by giving employees space and independence. But, in fact, they are not reinforcing positive behaviors or correcting negative behaviors. Employees want managers to follow up on assignments to find out what they are doing right and what they could do better. Tying positive outcomes to the employee's bonus reinforces those behaviors and improves productivity.

Satisfaction. It is difficult for employees to put out the effort necessary to get their work done if they are dissatisfied. People may believe they can do the job (confidence) and that outcomes will be tied to performance (trust), but they will not be motivated if they believe the outcomes will be unsatisfactory. It does not make sense for anyone to work hard for something he doesn't want.

Many managers fail to take the time to find out what is satisfying and dissatisfying to *each* employee. When motivating employees, many managers make the mistake of believing and acting as though everyone is motivated in the same way. But motivations differ. For example, some employees are motivated by challenging work, while others find it intimidating. Some prefer the certainty of a fixed routine; others thrive on task variety.

Managers also cannot assume that each individual employee will be satisfied if the three “big outcomes”—money, advancement and job security—are fulfilled. Other outcomes, such as praise, recognition, openness or honesty, may be more motivating to some employees.

The solution to this problem is simple: Ask your employees what outcomes motivate them. Employees will gladly tell you what they want from you. Another interesting point is that when the work itself is satisfying, employees tend to be very forgiving when there is a shortfall in rewards. Why? Because employees are getting something that is highly prized by most people in today's work environment—enjoyment from their work.

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