

Tips for Improving Motivation

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The concept of motivation is one of the most misunderstood terms in the leadership lexicon. Reason: Most leaders either never learned or have forgotten the nature of motivation, so they try to achieve it using ineffective tools. This white paper focuses on the learning from Herzberg's Two Factor theory and why those concepts can be translated into helpful guidelines that create the opportunity for higher levels of motivation.

I believe the average organization obtains only a tiny fraction of the potential human effort that is available. My guess is that most organizations receive less than 20% of the discretionary effort that resides in its people. Even if my number is off by quite a bit, it still means that we could probably double productivity and still have people working at only about half of their capacity. Wow, that represents some wonderful low hanging fruit. But how do we get that effort to come forth?

As a leader, how many times a week do you say, "We've got to motivate our people?" When you do, you make a mistake that often leads to lower rather than higher motivation. Seeking to motivate employees is the most common thought pattern leaders use every day, so what's wrong with it?

Trying to motivate workers shows a lack of understanding about what motivation is and how it is achieved. Leaders who think this way want to propel the boat before raising the sail. While the temptation to get going may seem irresistible, it is not a wise strategy. Leaders do not make the necessary mind shift to do the things that actually do improve motivation and catch the wind of trust. So, what is the sail and what is the boat? The sail is the culture of the organization that either enables or extinguishes motivation. The boat is what people sit in, or how satisfied people feel at any particular moment.

Why do many leaders try to reverse the conventional order and try to motivate people by simply trying to make them feel better? Some reasons may include:

- 1. Poor understanding of motivation** - The notion that by adding perks to the workplace, we somehow make people more motivated is flawed. Over 50 years ago, Frederick Herzberg taught us that increasing the so-called "hygiene factors"⁴ is a good way to stay in the boat (reduce dissatisfaction in the workplace), but a poor way to increase motivation and actually get to our destination. Why?

Because goodies like picnics, pizza parties, hat days, bonuses, new furniture, etc. often help people become happier at work, but they do little to impact the reasons they are motivated to do their best work.

2. **Taking the easy way out** - Many leaders believe that by heaping nice things on top of people, it will feel like a better culture. Downwind Leaders realize the only way to improve the culture is to build transparency and trust. By focusing on a better environment, managers enable people to motivate themselves.
3. **Using the wrong approach** - It is difficult to motivate another person. You can scare a person into compliance, but that's not motivation, it is fear. You can bribe a person into feeling happy, but that's not motivation it is temporary euphoria that is quickly replaced by a "what have you done for me lately" mentality. When leaders approach motivation as something they "do to" the workers, it has the wrong connotation. The word "motivate" should not be used as a verb. I cannot motivate you. Instead, I can create an environment where you choose to become motivated. The difference between those two concepts sounds like double talk, but it is a *crucial* leadership concept to grasp.
4. **Focusing on perks** - Individuals will gladly climb aboard the floating vessel , but the reason they go the extra mile is a personal choice based on the level of motivational factors (the sail), not the size of the boat.
5. **Trying to force morale** – Some companies have a kind of pep talk on a daily basis followed by a cheer before employees are allowed to work. There are two ways of looking at this practice. In most groups, these pep rallies have only a short-term positive impact on morale. In fact, many groups eventually stop the practice altogether because of the incredible negative impact on morale. The boss is uncomfortable because she knows people hate the "morning meeting" and the discipline of the company cheer before going to work has become a joke. People feel the activity is a waste of time, because their morale comes from sources other than pep talks. It does not matter what the boss says at the start of each shift. What matters are the signals sent a thousand times all day outside of the rallies. The ritual of a morning meeting only serves to underscore the hypocrisy, and therefore, has the reverse impact of what was intended. In some groups, the pep rally concept actually does produce higher morale and is a sustainable positive force in the company.⁵ What factors allow this to happen?
 - a. **The meeting itself** – There is some actual benefit if the meeting contains useful information or some kind of social support that people find helpful. Often the meetings are a time to remind employees of new policies or drill on the location of recently moved articles. By enhancing basic communication, these meetings help managers perform a basic function that would be hard to achieve in an e-mail or other form of announcement. It also gives employees a chance to question the information for sanity or just to verify understanding. So if WIIFM (What's In It For Me)⁶ has enough positive power, then a morning meeting might actually work.

- b. The centering thoughts** – rather like an exercise in yoga, some meetings help people compartmentalize their lives so they can display the right persona for customers. They can filter out the chaos or distractions going on elsewhere in their lives and focus on the tasks at hand. This would be the equivalent of a team “suiting up” before a public sporting event.
- c. A pre-existing environment of trust** – if the leader has achieved a culture of trust where people see congruence of words and actions, the leader will have more credibility. This is the equivalent of a coach in sports. In this case, a rallying cry for team spirit may actually inspire some people to put forth more effort. At least the company cheer has the potential to generate some fraternal feelings that are directionally helpful. Without the element of trust, these cheers have little chance to produce a positive impact.
- d. Employee ownership** – if the meeting is sponsored and designed by the employees for their own benefit, then they have a much better chance than if it is a management-driven event. This shows the link between empowerment and morale. When the workers are respected for being mature enough to design and conduct a meeting, with perhaps some guest appearances from management, the dynamic can be a liberating influence. The flip side of this is if certain cliques within the worker ranks own the process to the exclusion of others, the chosen ones will alienate the rest of the group and eclipse the benefits.

In a true Downwind environment, daily meetings can be helpful for the above reasons. Communication is enhanced, which helps transparency, and it gives managers the opportunity to model reinforcing candor.

In general, the early shift meetings should be avoided if there are trust issues among people in the organization. Some people would argue that is precisely the reason to invoke the technique in an attempt to remedy a low trust situation. I think where low trust is a pre-existing condition, the dangers outweigh the benefits. Since most organizations have extremely low trust, it is a good idea to proceed with great caution when considering trying to enforce morale through daily meetings. The old adage feels all too real for many employees, “The beatings will continue until morale improves.”

Most organizations obtain only a tiny fraction of the effort that is possible from the people they employ. A key measure is what percentage of discretionary does your culture elicit (and there is no known way to measure this variable accurately). No organization can get a sustained 100% of the potential effort of people. That’s because it would require a continual flow of adrenalin that would be fatal. But if my estimate is accurate, most organizations can double the effort of most people by using the Trust Model and still have them operating at a comfortable 50% level from their peak. The key enabler to this leap in productivity is the existence of real trust within the organization.

*The preceding information was adapted from the book **Leading with Trust is like Sailing Downwind**, by Robert Whipple. It is available on www.leadergrow.com.*

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