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Understanding Motivation: An Effective Tool for Managers¹

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Introduction

Motivation is an important tool that is often under-utilized by managers in today's workplace. Managers use motivation in the workplace to inspire people to work, both individually and in groups, to produce the best results for business in the most efficient and effective manner. It was once assumed that motivation had to be generated from the outside, but it is now understood that each individual has his own set of motivating forces. It is the duty of the manager to carefully identify and address these motivating forces. This paper will help managers become more effective at creating a positive motivational environment.

Managers may lack knowledge in implementing successful motivational programs that increase production and create a positive work environment. Although there are many types of motivation, management must identify with their associates (employees) on an individual level for successful programs. The goal of every manager is to increase production and efficiency to reach maximum results for the organization. Motivation for better performance depends on job satisfaction,

achievement, recognition, and professional growth (Boyett and Boyett, 2000). Providing a positive motivational work environment is a challenging managerial activity. Therefore, managers must understand associates and their professional needs.

Identifying Motivating Factors

The manager must identify what actually motivates associates. People tend to do their best work when they are in an environment that makes them feel valued, where they get a "pat on the back" or a "thank you" for a job well done. These courtesies may seem simple, but managers sometimes forget to utilize them. Managers can do simple things that can have a great impact on organizational morale to motivate associates to "go the extra mile." How is a welcoming environment created to develop motivated associates? Managers sometimes forget the power of the simple courtesies that go a long way in improving the work environment.

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There are several factors managers should keep in mind when thinking about how to recognize and reward associates. Managers should not assume that people feel valued just because they continue to be productive, nor that what works for them, in terms of recognition and reward, will work for others. The "platinum rule" is that you should do unto others as they would have you do unto them (Kepner and Wysocki, 2002). This rule should help create a better motivational environment because associates may feel more appreciated if managers are effectively meeting associates' needs.

Motivation

A study, published in 1999 by Kenneth Kovach of George Mason University, compared associates' ranking of what they wanted from their jobs with what their bosses thought was important to the associates. The results of the study were somewhat surprising. At the top of the associates' list was *interesting work*, followed by *appreciation of work*, *a feeling of being "in on things"*, *job security*, and *good wages* (Table 1). Employers thought *good wages*, *job security*, *promotion/growth*, *good working conditions*, and *interesting work* were most important to their staff.

Motivating people can be challenging because associates are individuals, meaning what works for one, may not work for another. Managers must be able to communicate with associates. According to Kenneth Kovach (1999), managers sometimes disregard the most important motivational techniques when dealing with associates. Managers often think monetary incentives are the best way to motivate associates, but more often than not non-monetary incentives are best. Kovach's survey provides good ideas for motivational opportunities.

Two key managerial points emerge from Kovach's work: what associates most want from their jobs can be easily be addressed by their supervisors and are relatively inexpensive to implement (Table 1). This is in sharp contrast to wages, job security, and promotion which are usually under the control of top-level managers. It is also a good idea to consider career development and where people are in their careers when thinking about rewards and recognition.

Incentives can be both monetary and non-monetary. For example, pay incentives might be appealing to young workers, professional development opportunities might interest mid-career associates and being part of policy and strategic planning might interest long-term associates.

Other Factors

Another easily overlooked and important factor is attitude. If a supervisor or team leader approaches the workplace with a positive, upbeat attitude about the work projects, that enthusiasm should transfer to associates, thus creating a better work environment for all. Leaders and supervisors, who are serious about maintaining a productive work environment and motivating their staff to do their best, need to talk with the associates to find out what is important to them. For example, some associates may not appreciate public forms of recognition, while others will (Howell, 2000).

However, managers cannot do the same thing over and over again to motivate people. They must investigate the issue and ask themselves questions about which associates prefer what, such as public or private recognition, and task-focused or relationship-focused. Public recognition can involve associate meetings, department newsletters, trophy presentations, or gifts of flowers at the office. Private recognition can involve gift certificates for favorite stores or restaurants, acknowledging accomplishment in written evaluations, or gifts of flowers delivered to associates' homes. Task-oriented associates may appreciate being given more challenging projects or being asked for their input, while relationship-focused associates may respond to a "thank you" at the end of the day or extra support during difficult times.

Understanding Associates' Needs

When trying to understand associates, managers must consider the fact that the career status of associates will vary. Associates nearing the end of their careers might appreciate being given mentoring responsibilities or more control of their work environment, while mid-career staff members might appreciate flexible scheduling options and professional development opportunities and those

early in their career might need immediate praise to boost their confidence. According to Kovac (1999), managers should ask themselves the following 10 questions when attempting to provide a more positive motivational climate for associates:

1. Do you personally thank staff for a job well done?
2. Is feedback timely and specific?
3. Do you make time to meet with—and listen to—staff on a regular basis?
4. Is your workplace open, trusting, and fun?
5. Do you encourage and reward initiative and new ideas?
6. Do you share information about your organization with staff on a regular basis?
7. Do you involve staff in decisions, especially those that will affect them?
8. Do you provide staff with a sense of ownership of their jobs and the unit as a whole?
9. Do you give associates the chance to succeed?
10. Do you reward staff based on their performance?

Conclusion

Motivation can be properly or improperly achieved and can either hinder or improve productivity. Management must understand that they are dealing with human beings, not machines, and that motivation involves getting people to do something because they want to do it. This cannot be achieved without knowing what is important to associates. Management must use the proper incentives to achieve the desired results. Simply stated, if the proper motivational environment is in place, managers will be rewarded with productive associates.

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Table 1. Associate motivation survey results.

Associates' Ranking	Items	Employers' Ranking
1	Interesting work	5
2	Appreciation of work	8
3	Feeling "in on things"	10
4	Job security	2
5	Good wages	1
6	Promotion/growth	3
7	Good working conditions	4
8	Personal loyalty	6
9	Tactful discipline	7
10	Sympathetic help with problems	9

Source: Kovach, 1999.