Understanding Motivation: An Effective Tool for Managers

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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 individually or in groups to produce the best results for business in the most efficient and effective manner. Each individual has his own set of motivating forces, so it is the duty of the manager to carefully identify and address these motivating forces. The aim of this article is to 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 employees (associates) 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.

Identifying Motivating Factors

It is important to create a welcoming work environment to motivate associates. People tend to do their best work when they are in a work 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. Simple courtesies can go a long way in improving the work environment.


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There are several factors managers should keep in mind when considering how to recognize and reward associates. Managers should not assume that people feel valued just because they are productive, nor that what works for the manager in terms of recognition and reward will work for others. The “platinum rule” of managers creating rapport with associates is an important motivational tool.

**Motivation**

A study by Kovach (1999) compared associates’ rankings of what they most wanted from their jobs with what management thought associates wanted most. The results of the study were somewhat surprising. While management thought associates would list “good wages” as most important, “interesting work” was ranked most important by associates.

Motivating people can be challenging because associates are individuals, meaning that what works for one may not work for another. Managers must be able to communicate with associates. According to Kovach (1999), managers sometimes disregard the most important motivational techniques. While monetary incentives are important, sometimes non-monetary incentives are the better choice.

Two key managerial points emerge from Kovach’s survey (1999). First, non-monetary incentives for associates often can be easily 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. Second, it is important for managers to consider career development incentives for associates when thinking about rewards and recognition.

**Table 1. Associate motivation survey results**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Associates’ Ranking</th>
<th>Items</th>
<th>Employers’ Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Interesting work</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Appreciation of work</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Feeling “in on things”</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Job security</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Good wages</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Promotion/growth</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Good working conditions</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Personal loyalty</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Tactful discipline</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Sympathetic help with problems</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Kovach (1999).

**Other Factors**

One easily overlooked and important factor is attitude. If managers approach the workplace with a positive, upbeat attitude about work projects, that enthusiasm should transfer to associates, thus creating a better work environment for all. Managers, who are serious about maintaining a productive work environment and motivating associates to do their best, need to talk with the associates to find out what is important to them (Howell 2000). Some associates prefer public recognition, while others prefer private recognition. It is the responsibility of management to know which works best with their associates on an individual basis.

**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 associates beginning their careers might appreciate flexible scheduling options and professional development opportunities. According to Kovac (1999), managers should ask themselves the following questions when attempting to provide a more positive motivational climate for associates:

- Do you personally thank associates for a job well done?
- Is feedback timely and specific?
- Do you make time to discuss associates’ jobs on a regular basis?
- Is your workplace open, trusting, and fun?
- Do you encourage and reward initiative and new ideas?
- Do you share company information with associates on a regular basis?
- Do you involve associates in decisions, especially those that will affect them?
- Do you provide associates with a sense of ownership of their jobs?
- Do you give associates the chance to succeed?
- Do you reward associates based on their work performance?

**Conclusions**

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.

References
