

Enhancing Motivation through Work Meaningfulness¹

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Introduction

Proper human resources management can strengthen an organization through strategic talent recruitment and adequate benefits, but employee motivation is also needed to limit absenteeism and ensure the organization is reaching its full potential (Jehn, Rupert, & Nauta, 2006). Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski (2010) explain that the perception of an employee's daily responsibilities and meaningfulness of their work is just as important or more important than an income or job security. Work meaningfulness refers to the amount of significance an employee perceives in their work (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010).

Hackman and Oldham (1976) illustrate work motivation in their job characteristics model. According to the model, high-functioning and motivated employees need to experience meaningfulness in their work, responsibility for the outcomes of their work, and knowledge of the results of their work activities. Hackman and Oldham (1976) note that "self-generated motivation should be highest when all three of the psychological states are present" (p. 256).

Changing the Perception of Meaningful Work

Articulating an organization's ultimate aspirations and goals to employees can be used to help employees relate their work to those aspirations, but research like that of Bono and Judge (2003) illustrates that the repetitive articulation is counterproductive. However, Carton (2018) conducted a

deeper analysis of the successful work perception change of NASA, under the leadership of President John F. Kennedy, in order to put a man on the moon. Instead of repeatedly telling employees the goals of the organization, Kennedy's actions allowed employees to better relate their work to the aspirations of the organization so they could see the significance of their work (Carton, 2018).

Carton (2018) found that motivating NASA employees was more complex than telling them to adopt a new way of thinking. Instead, he analyzed Kennedy's actions and found four steps that started a new process for employees to interpret their work as more meaningful.

1. **The number of ultimate aspirations of the organization was reduced.** The ultimate aspiration is similar to the vision of the organization. It is not just a goal—it is the end point. It is not easy for an employee to see their work as meaningful if they are trying to juggle reaching multiple goals within one ultimate aspiration or vision. Instead, they need one overarching goal to work toward. In this case, the ultimate aspiration was reduced to two words: *advance science*.
2. **The ultimate aspiration was used to create a concrete objective.** Employees need something measurable to work toward. The concrete objective should be something measurable that fits under the umbrella of the ultimate aspiration. In NASA's case, the concrete objective was *to land on the moon*. NASA employees would know the

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objective was met when a man landed on the moon. This objective fits under the umbrella of advancing science.

3. Milestones were articulated. Employees need to see that there is support behind their work and that it is possible to meet the concrete objective. Milestones are plans or projects that help leadership communicate their support to employees. For NASA, *Gemini*, *Apollo*, and *Mercury* were all different projects that leadership invested in to help the employees get closer to reaching the set concrete objective.

4. Embodied concepts were used to connect the aspiration to the objective. Kennedy inspired employees by changing his language. Instead of repeatedly telling them to put a man on the moon or do more work to advance science, he used inspiring rhetoric such as, “*The moon and the planets are there, and new hopes for knowledge and peace are there.*”

These four steps allowed employees to focus on a specific goal and relate their own work to the organization’s ultimate aspiration. Relating their own work to the aspirations of the organization allows employees to better see the impacts of their own work, assume responsibility for the outcomes of their own work, and in turn, see the significance of their work (Hackman & Oldham, 1976). For example, an employee who welds metal may see their work as mundane, but that employee could become inspired by listening to Kennedy discuss the possibility of space exploration. The employee could better understand how the pieces of metal they welded would be part of the Apollo mission, help the organization reach the objective of landing on the moon, and advance science, rather than looking at their work simply as metal to be welded.

Conclusion

Work meaningfulness is described as the amount of significance an employee perceives in their work. Employees who view their work as meaningful demonstrate higher work motivation, performance, and satisfaction than employees who do not. In addition, organizations whose employees do not find meaning in their work have increased workplace absenteeism and turnover. Organizations, business owners, supervisors, and managers can utilize Carton’s (2018) four steps to increase employees’ work meaningfulness.

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