

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 or her own set of motivating forces. 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 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 work performance depends on many factors, including: job satisfaction, achievement, recognition, and professional growth (SHRM 2016). 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." It is important to create a welcoming work environment to motivate associates. Managers sometimes forget the power

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of the simple courtesies that go a long way in improving the work environment.

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 “treating others the way that *they* want to be treated” increases a manager’s ability to create rapport with associates as 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 when dealing with associates. While monetary incentives are important, sometimes non-monetary incentives are the better choice. Kovach’s survey provides good ideas for motivational opportunities.

Two key managerial points emerge from Kovach’s work. 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.

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 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 (Nicholson 2003). Some associates prefer public recognition, while others prefer private recognition. Public recognition can involve associate meetings, department newsletters, trophy presentations, or gifts of flowers at the office. According to the global employment website Monster.com, private recognition can be kept low-cost and simple, such as a gift certificate or gift appropriate to the associate’s specific interests, acknowledging accomplishment in a written evaluation or a thank-you note, gifts of flowers delivered to associates’ homes, or initiatives such as preferred parking, flex time, or wellness benefits (Matuson 2019).

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 Kovach (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 your 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 incentivizing people to do something because they want to do it. Effective

motivation 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).