

Employee Motivation: Benefits of a Committed Workforce

John Godinez and Michael Quinn

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Employee engagement is often not at a level it needs to be when organizations are trying to improve productivity and effectiveness, or just trying to grow their markets and bottom line. In many cases we've observed, companies simply don't invigorate employee commitment to the mission - - or worse, contribute to a detracting attitude. "Why bother?" we heard an employee in a challenged organization say "the pay's the same for the lousy stuff."

If an organization is to prosper, it can't afford to have employees not commit, or worse, stop caring about the work they contribute. A relatively small percentage of disengaged employees, clerical, technical, crafts, and/ or white-collar - - can seriously impact productivity and the bottom line. To compound the situation, this impact is not readily measured by standard production metrics and key performance indicators.

There are many factors that can contribute to or undermine employee motivation, especially workplace leadership factors. Recognizing the symptoms of an unmotivated workforce can lead to developing key actions that you as leaders and managers can consider to facilitate shifting the momentum toward greater effectiveness and efficiency of your employees' - - and therefore your organization's, performance.

Understanding Motivation

Employee motivation is a pervasive condition that distinguishes companies with committed employees from those that experience less effective productivity and performance. In a well-running workplace, motivated employees continually look for ways to improve what they do. When organizations or individual groups are struggling to meet expectations, leaders need to provide employees the appropriate encouragement to stay engaged.

Factors contributing to individual employee motivation are varied and come from several different sources. Focusing on just the workplace leadership factors that can directly influence motivation, one can see the significant impact that leaders have on employee motivation and performance.

Impacting Workforce Motivation

Instead of encouraging employee commitment, management can actually demotivate with activities that include: making employees feel unimportant; ineffectively addressing

employee concerns and questions; fostering a threatening environment; promoting a 'blaming' culture, not acknowledging employee efforts; and not following through on commitments, among many others, that basically erode trust. When the 'crunch' is on to meet an end of schedule quota, etc., we have often observed management pushing productivity with behaviors that may incent employees to accomplish the task at hand in the short term, but at a long-term significant cost of eroded trust, attitude, motivation, and morale. This is not the way to motivate or to assure continued profitability.

As well, and contrary to some manager's thinking, employees will often not be content with simply realizing their compensation goals, a clear career path, and a secure position in their organization. These three elements are indeed important for at least retention, however will not likely suffice beyond the shorter-term horizon for sustaining employee motivation.

Employees need a workplace where they are not only respected but have a sense of respect for themselves. They need an environment where it is safe to voice differences, especially if things aren't working as well as they should be in other words, an environment of trust among and between the workforce and the leadership team.

There are a number of positive motivators that can energize employee commitment even more than money - - such as appreciation, personal recognition, added responsibility, professional achievement, pride in a job well done, contributing to the planning process, and other efforts that encourage a sense of teamwork, collaboration, and accomplishment. Ask your employees what outcomes motivate them. Many of the significant responses will likely entail the preceding examples.

A client shared with us that while working his way up the ranks he sometimes started or ended the day with snow on the ground during our typical New England winters. "When you're wearing work boots and used to working in the elements it's not a big deal. Years later, after a career change and coming into the plant very early one morning, it had snowed with an accumulation of about six inches. Well, I managed to get snow in my dress shoes. Starting out the day with cold wet feet was an unpleasant distraction. I developed a firsthand appreciation for the people who kept our roads and sidewalks clean and safe."

Being a valued part of the company has a much greater impact on employee commitment than just feeling like a number. No matter how small the contribution a person makes to the overall product, a sense of pride and appreciation for every contributor to the team's success should be expressed at all levels of the organization.

Tapping the Knowledge

Your employees know what and where many of the problems are. When employees are not motivated, latent problems are more likely to stay latent, until they emerge at inopportune times. This is not an indictment on employees it's more often than not an unintended behavioral outcome. But that really doesn't matter after chronic

production problems (and the occasional acute incident) post-mortem indicate that numerous opportunities were missed to address problems before they happened. Not to mention the cost. And in many cases, your employees know the solutions that can address the problems - - before they emerge.

Sound Practices for Successful Motivation: Investing in Your People

Most companies do an effective job with technical and structural framework skills training, however often place very little emphasis on the social or people skills training that make up a considerable element of an organization's operations. This training can entail such activities as active listening, coaching, and developing management (and employees), and can play an important role encouraging motivation and advancing a culture of trust.

While these leadership training activities may seem obvious, they alone will not suffice. Some facilitated behaviors and activities we have seen that yield significantly positive outcomes include:

Making a genuine effort to know the people that are part of your team. Practicing an open door policy. Actively listening to your people, understanding the need for work-life balance, and communicating a rapport that will earn their respect and trust. Holding employee meetings that encourage a culture of openness regarding their questions and concerns, while ensuring that respect for individuals voicing their concerns is maintained.

Building a routine that involves your employees in decisions that will affect them without ceding management decision making authority. Soliciting their ideas and opinions, which goes a long way to getting buy-in, will facilitate setting goals with clear expectations that incorporate individual responsibility and accountability.

And, establishing a feedback loop that supports the areas previously discussed. Monitor beneficial suggestion intake and implementation and be sure that your feedback system is timely and effective. This single undertaking is the glue that will bind your team's efforts.

Tapping the Emotion: Motivating Your Employees

An organization's success relies heavily on the participation and support of its employees. Embodied in old habits are the ingredients that accounts for past success - - and tied to that success is the strong emotion that drives people to something that has worked for them. The key is to tap into the emotion that stimulates the drive needed to keep them engaged until they experience the positive emotion of new success anchored to new habits.

There is likely no greater motivator in the workplace than for an employee to be recognized for being a part of and reinforcing the emotion of success. Modifying old

habits while aligning to new ones, including management role modeling, is an ongoing process.

Summing Up

Assess your organization - - are your employees consistently taking the steps beyond the minimum to facilitate work flow processes and effectiveness? If your organization doesn't enjoy a motivated workplace, a sense of urgency may need to be established when your strategic and operational goals are not being met.

Properly communicating with your organization/ people is vital to meeting expectations and goals. Provide a clear, consistent message with a road map that establishes current state and vision of the desired future. When internal efforts are not achieving improvements on motivation, trust may be the limiting factor. If you believe this to be the case, a third party may be needed to facilitate the needed change and transition.

Most of us can't remember every performance pay raise or incentive bonus we received, but vividly remember when someone from the team, management, or executive management thanked us for our contribution to a job well done. The message from this experience is to consider the things that influence how employees start and end their day - - and to recognize the people who provide what we sometimes take for granted.

Establishing and sustaining a motivated workforce can help your company meet and overcome the daily challenges of staying competitive, off-shoring, and successfully transitioning during significant change initiatives. If your team is struggling to take care of its internal customers, how can your company expect to satisfy its external customers?

John Godinez and Michael Quinn are principals in WorkPlace Cornerstone Group LLC, a change management and organizational effectiveness and development consulting practice.

They can be reached at www.workplacecornerstonegroup.com and at 860.537.1044