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A new advance in motivation theory

Do you want to find powerful new ways to motivate employees? If you do, then the first step is to avoid de-motivating them.

The key factor to remember here is that in our natural state we are pretty well self-motivated. As human beings we are naturally enthusiastic and curious. We are happy to problem-solve for the good of their host group. But what can stop us being our natural selves is stress.

It is actually the stress that is inherent in the way we run modern organisations that tends to de-motivate people.

Modern motivation theory suggests that rather than looking for external factors that might motivate people such incentive schemes and extra pay, managers simply need to avoid taking those actions that cause stress and de-motivate their employees.

The human givens model of motivation theory

A powerful new approach to psychology, known as the human givens approach, recognises that human beings come into life with certain innate biological needs. When these needs or human givens are threatened or neglected, stress arises. This stress response triggers a wave of hormonal changes in our physiology that effectively reduce a range of innate resources.

This hijacking of the brain, as it is sometimes called, can inhibit our enthusiasm, positivity, loyalty, and our ability to empathise with those around us. In addition stress harms our ability to think straight, access our imagination and perform effectively.

By going some way to meet people's biological needs, managers can avoid creating stress and so enable people to maintain their optimum performance. Here are ten suggestions that will help you avoid the usual pitfalls of stress inducing management.

Ten top tips for peak performance

Tip number one – Provide recognition and social status

Give employees recognition for the work they do and the contribution they make. It costs nothing to show appreciation but the rewards to the organisation are immense.

Part of meeting the need for social status is to avoid supplying judgemental criticism of a person's worth or value. Instead it is far more motivational to focus on positive feedback. It is best therefore to balance criticism with positive feedback and limit criticism to rational observations of an employee's behaviour and performance.

However whatever feedback you think is required, make sure you give it. Zero feedback is highly de-motivating as it neglects the human need for attention.

Tip number two – Give a challenge

Human beings naturally rise to a challenge. This faculty is a key survival mechanism that has served us well over the eons. So why not make use of it? Give your employees a challenge. This means don't solve their operational problems for them. As their boss, you might well know how to do things better than them. But give them the responsibility and means to use creative problem solving about their own area of work and you will be amazed at the transformation in productivity.

Tip number three – Ensure a sense of belonging

How can you expect loyalty unless you make this reciprocal? If you make people feel they belong, their natural state of loyalty will pay dividends. They will always be happy to go that extra mile and they will take pains over the welfare of the organisation. This will benefit the organisation in countless ways.

But this reciprocity means the organisation has to make sacrifices too on behalf of their employees. So, for instance during the good times, instead of distributing all the profits to new ventures or shareholders, build some fat into the system. Use this fat to hang on to people for as long as you can during the lean times. Don't expect and demand loyalty and then slash and burn as soon as there is a whiff of a downturn. Accountants and short-term thinkers hate this whole idea. But to succeed in business you need to be thinking further ahead than your next quarter's profits.

Similarly over ambitious managers put their own career interests ahead of the organisation's interests. This means they tend to take too short term a view and override the long-term needs of the employees and the organisation. Other employees realise it and are instinctively wary of such managers and the organisation that employees them. So remove over-ambitious employees and fire people at whatever level for being disloyal to the organisation.

Tip number four – Empower participation in decision-making

Everyone has an innate need for some autonomy and control over their lives. Denying this human given can be a real de-motivator. So, why not allow people to join in with the process of decision-making? Let them plan their own area of activity. They probably know more about it than you anyway and it is a great method to get new ideas and stimulate creative problem solving that really adds value to the organisation.

Tip number five – Provide ongoing feedback

Provide regular, forthright and ongoing feedback as to your employees' progress. Human beings need attention as well as recognition, so lavish people with ongoing positive feedback. At the same time deliver timely and non-personal negative feedback about areas of weakness.



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Importantly where there are areas of weakness provide opportunities for addressing them through training, self-development help or even the reallocation of tasks. Don't just take the easy option and fire the employee or manoeuvre them out in some bogus redundancy scheme. The rest of your employees aren't stupid. They know what is going on, recognise that they are in a hostile environment and will adopt the appropriate survival mechanism. You can guarantee this will be to your disadvantage in the long run.

Tip number six – Enable work to be fun

Provide scope for fun that is intrinsic to the work. This can be as easy as allowing the employees to have a hand in designing their own work processes, work area and routine. They know what they need to make life enjoyable at work, so where this does not conflict with operational requirements let them build this into the work processes. Happy workers are productive workers. Miserable employees will simply dump their stress on everyone around them including the organisation.

Tip number seven – Allow social interaction

We are highly gregarious mammals and thrive off regular social interaction. Without this we tend to feel isolated and insecure and can get stressed as a result. This need is closely linked to the need for belonging and the need for some sort of social status and means that some sort of social interaction needs to be designed into the work environment. An important point here is to keep operational units below a size of 150 people. Beyond this size a workplace tends to lose cohesion and staff start to feel disconnected.

Tip number eight – Ensure a healthy routine

The long working hours culture in the UK causes stress in a variety of ways, not least of which is the simple exhaustion. Tiredness not only de-motivates, but also reduces our ability to function effectively. It also results in sickness absenteeism and high staff turnover all of which contribute to hits on the bottom line. Working long hours over any length of time is unsustainable and is totally counter-productive.

The straightforward answer is to facilitate a stable healthy routine. For instance, allow employees time off for meals and provide adequate break times. Prevent managers from contacting workers after hours, don't tolerate workaholic bosses that expect employees to follow suit. The higher productivity over the long term will more than compensate for any actual short-term cost by a huge margin.

Tip number nine – Instigate continual improvement

Instilling a culture of continuous improvement is a great natural motivator. Continuous improvement techniques based around adequate training, good teamwork the devolvement of authority and problem solving to the lowest possible level are exhilarating and liberating and give a real sense of purpose and achievement to those involved. With continuous improvement initiatives, employees get to challenge fixed



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ideas; generate prompt action; think through problems to get results; drill down to the root cause of problems, and then perpetuate improvements through a one step at a time philosophy. The result is exhilarating and liberating for all participants. The impact on the organisation is transformational.

Tip number ten – Insist on high standards of quality and ethics

The two aspects are inextricably linked.

Both low quality performance and poor ethics generate a wide range of negative reactions among staff. For example, constantly compensating for poor quality or covering up for the company or just witnessing poor standards of ethical behaviour can be demoralising to say the least.

Low standards create inner conflict and confusion. Employees find they have to engage in all kinds of antics such as frantic fire fighting or lying to customers about delivery schedules or mucking suppliers about over payment. This type of activity tends to hit peoples' self-esteem in the long term, as they feel they are not doing anything worthwhile, it also undermines the sense of meaning they have about their work.

Nobody relishes working for an outfit with a cowboy reputation and this damages feelings of social status in the wider community. Healthy unstressed people are naturally conscientious and so delivering poor service or poor products to customers is dissatisfying to most of us.

Creating an atmosphere of trust and openness in the working environment improves energy levels by as much as 50%. So an important ingredient to the motivational mix is to maintain and expect rigorous ethical standards when dealing with all stakeholders. This includes clients, suppliers as well as employees and shareholders.

Using TBD integrates all these ten motivational factors into the planning and leadership process. This is one of TBD's key transforming agents that drive your business to new levels of productivity and performance.