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# Motivation for leaders: Seven proven levers

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Leaders are responsible for creating an environment people can succeed in. This doesn't require an extreme personality or an ego to drive the corporate battle. It requires an ability to create a meaningful place to work



Harry Truman once said that leadership is the ability to get people to do what they don't like to do and like it. It's certainly true that as a leader, it's your job to enable people to execute your strategy. And if your institution is a democratic one, or even if you simply want people to be fully engaged in making your strategy happen, you'll have to do that by persuasion, not coercion or force. Your job as leader is to create the environment where people want to bring your strategy alive. Your job, then, is motivation.

Good performance relies on two things: motivation and ability. So, assuming that your people have the ability to succeed at their jobs, any performance problem is likely to be motivation based. Research (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002; Koloc, 2013) shows that engaged and motivated employees are 44% more likely to stay in their jobs, are 50% more productive, get 56% higher customer loyalty scores and are 33% more profitable on average.

But what exactly is motivation? The answer may be obvious to you, but it usually means different things to different people. The strict definition of motivation is the attempt to direct, energise and regulate goal-oriented activity. You want to motivate your employees to contribute towards the success of your organisation. When it comes to getting people on board, there's one type of motivation you want in your arsenal above all others: intrinsic motivation.

## Intrinsic motivation

Most people's hobbies are intrinsically motivated. Ever noticed the dedication and fervour people apply to collecting vinyl or practising yoga? Not many people translate that energy into the workplace. When they do, the results are astounding. If someone truly believes in your ideas and values, they hold your power in their hands. Put simply, they have to feel good about what you want.

Many employers think that by making sure their people have good relationships with each other and by paying them fairly, they have laid fertile enough ground for extraordinary effort to grow. The rest is down to the employees themselves. This is false. Motivation is vastly different from satisfaction. Fifty years of research has consistently found that being happy on the job is not linked to the quality of performance.

Satisfied employees do, however, stay in jobs longer and spend more time working. The jury is still out on

whether being happy causes people to work more hours, or whether people spending more time at work – for whatever reason – get more satisfaction from achieving more. But a majority of the evidence sides with Abraham Lincoln on this one: “Most folks are about as happy as they make their mind up to be.” In other words, you can't make your people happy. What you can do is motivate them. But how?

There are seven key levers based on existing research that have been proven to improve the performance of your team and the key people in it.

## Job design

Can you redesign or tailor jobs to fit specific individuals and their values and preferences? Can you add or subtract parts of jobs and reassign them to suit the individuals who are in the roles now? You need to understand what motivates each individual team member.

## Training

What skills does this person need or want that you could provide? Think differently about training here: it doesn't have to be formal. There are wonderful ways to train your team – think, for example about reverse mentoring and job shadowing.

## Participation in decision-making

Can you include members of the team in decision-making for the group or organisation? Or at least consult them on important decisions? Do you use the results from employee surveys?

## Strong selection

Do they respect, value or even admire their teammates and want to work with them? Do new hires share the same values as existing employees?

## Dealing with poor performers

Are there processes to allow you to move out those who are under-delivering?

## Clear and transparent rules

Is everyone held to the same rules as rewards are given? This is where clear human resource (HR) policies come in. Do your people feel a sense of fairness within the office? If they don't, find out if their opinion is justified and do what you can to fix inequity. Perceptions that the 'system' is fair are crucial.

## Competitive pay

Is the pay on a par with what they could earn elsewhere? This is not to say you have to, or even want to, be the best payer in the industry. Remember, money is not the only motivating force, and for most people in who earn even a living wage, not a terribly effective one either.

**Money: the mother of all motivators?**

The relationship between money and performance is complex. Performance-related pay has been found to lead to both positive and negative effects. Here's the best of what we know now:

- Pay cuts across many aspects of motivation – it provides for certain needs, allows people to achieve certain goals, but can also lead to perceptions of inequity.
- It depends on job content whether incentive pay is useful. For example, it's more useful in sales than in R&D because performance is easier to quantify and make transparent.
- Whatever you give money for is done, everything else is not done: organisational citizenship and culture generally gets ignored!
- Pay generally encourages short-term behaviours that are rewarded, not long-term investments.
- Performance-related pay can undermine intrinsic motivation because people come to believe that they do it for the money, rather than because they enjoy it and just happen to get paid for it.

If you must use money to motivate because it is standard practice in your industry, it's essential that performance is objectively and transparently measured, with rewards linked directly to performance. Any bias in favour of particular individuals or teams kills motivation. Also, make sure rewards are substantial: at least 7% of base pay. In some industries, of course, union or legislative rules forbid rewarding good performance differently to average or poor performance, forcing management to rely on intrinsic rewards to motivate their teams. This is no bad thing.

## Make it meaningful

Over the last 30 years, the proportion of American workers who say that their work is meaningful and makes use of their abilities has doubled. Work today is a far cry from the routine and bureaucratic jobs of earlier eras when extrinsic reward were the only ones to deploy.

Although leaders are usually quick to recognise how their own behaviour is intrinsically motivated, many still assume that others respond best to money. The good thing about money is that you can usually make a system for HR that sorts financial rewards out for you. Building intrinsic motivation is the job of a leader. The task of articulating a meaningful purpose for the organisation lies with you. To do that, you need to tap into what exactly your organisation does for its customers, and build it into the fabric of all you do.

Leaders at all levels look to the top for the message that the organisation is doing work that matters. Managers need to focus discussions around how projects can be meaningful. It's not easy. Leadership is more than creating happy employees. It's about the more difficult task of creating work environments where people can find meaning and feel engaged. Because the truth is, not everyone will have a job they find meaningful.

## Creating a meaningful workplace

While not everyone will find meaning in their work, everyone does have it within them to find meaning at work. As a leader, it is up to you to make that happen. People don't trust leaders who say one thing and do another. How can you expect your teams to execute your strategy if you don't stick to your own plans? A workplace is a community, and communities run on trust. If your parents ever told you "do as I say, not do as I do" or "do it because I am your parent", then you will remember the lack of inclination you had to obey them and the ensuing lack of respect.

On your leadership journey, you will either be known as someone with integrity who follows through on commitments and models the behaviour they expect in others, or someone who does not. Without a meaningful workplace, there can be no intrinsic motivation, and with no intrinsic motivation, performance is never as good as it could be.

If you have a leader you look up to, the chances are they know this and live by it. Great leaders know the limits to their power: they know that coercing people into following them has short-term effects at best. Coerced people don't cooperate for long. Harry Truman knew this: "All the President is, is a glorified public relations man who spends his time flattering, kissing and kicking people to get them to do what they are supposed to do anyway", he once said.

While I don't recommend kicking or kissing, Truman's words are profound. Remember them.

