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Discover What Motivates Your Staff

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Motivation is a crucial element for a productive and effective workforce. A lack of motivation is a common complaint among managers and also a good indicator that there is a need for coaching. In this article, I'll focus on the basic theories about motivation, and the first step in motivating: discovering the inner motivations of your people. In a future article, I'll discuss how to use coaching practices to harness the power of those inner motivations to the company's benefit.

Many managers find that motivating their people is one of the biggest challenges they face. It is a complex task because it is completely different for each individual that you want to motivate. Most managers find some people very easy to understand and motivate, while others are unreachable or beyond their comprehension. Coaching practices can be extremely helpful in providing the skills to understand the personal motivations of individuals, even difficult ones, and to use this information to align their motivations with organizational goals. But before we get to the coaching skills, here's a brief review of the basic theories behind motivating people.

Motivation – How Does it Work?

Referring to the Harvard Business Review paperback on Motivating People¹, we can see that while new management fads for how to motivate people have come and gone over the past few decades, human nature has not changed in the meantime and the proven strategies that were articulated in the 1950s are just as relevant today. It is heartening to read these strategies that align perfectly with the coach approach to managing people. Below are some very brief summaries of the key points made by a few authors. You can reflect

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on the questions to consider how these points affect you and your team.

Fredrick Herzberg:

Real motivation happens when someone is willing to do something without external prompting. For example, if you need to keep kicking your dog to get him to move, you are the one who is motivated, not the dog. Are your people truly motivated or are they just earning a paycheck?

External factors such as money, benefits and working hours prevent dissatisfaction. Only internal factors create internal motivation. What internal factors motivate you? What motivates your people?

Nigel Nicholson:

You cannot motivate anyone. People can only motivate themselves. Everyone has motivational energy but it is often blocked in the workplace. Removing those blockages requires employee participation. How do you work with your people to help them become motivated? What are you doing that blocks your staff's internal motivation?

Harry Levinson:

To be effective in the longer run, employees' objectives must be designed to meet both individual and organizational purposes. In other words, forcing people to work solely towards organizational goals without consideration for personal goals will lead to loss of morale.

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Conversely, when individuals' goals are designed to align both organizational and personal purposes, employees are much more engaged and require less external motivation to get the job done. How well do your staff's personal goals align with the organization's goals?

Discover the Inner Motivation

According to these authors, the first step in helping someone become motivated is to discover what internal factors motivate them. You need to find the source of the inner motivational energy. This is where coaching skills become vital. Here are a few different strategies you can use to discover what motivates people.

- 1) Use a personality assessment system that identifies preferences, traits or strengths. A person's natural tendencies indicate what motivates them. I recommend Harrison Assessments² as they survey a very wide range of traits based on a person's preferences. Using the data from the assessment, have a discussion with the person assessed to understand more completely how they feel about their strengths, how they use them and why they enjoy these strengths. Remember that although the assessment is likely to be accurate, they are the true experts on their own motivations.

- 2) Ask them to tell you about a time when they were really happy at work. Draw them out to uncover what exactly was motivating them at the time. Listen closely to what was important to them. Accept what they say and withhold your judgment. Notice their body language to understand what thrills them.

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- 3) Observe how they behave when they have complete choice.
What do they do in their spare time? What kind of tasks do they volunteer for?

An Example

A client of mine was promoted to a management position in a new department and was concerned about enlisting the support of the existing staff during a period of uncertainty and change in the organization. He used some simple Harrison Assessment reports to uncover the strengths and weaknesses of his four direct reports. With the insight of the assessments, he was able to have productive conversations with each of his staff members to discuss in detail how they wanted to work and how they could best support the organization. Since the Harrison Questionnaire is based on a person's preferences, the strengths and weaknesses indicated in the reports point to what the person is motivated or not motivated to do or be.

The report revealed very different traits between the employees and so my client was able to tailor his conversations with the staff to leverage on their strengths and discuss how to accommodate or change their weaknesses. Apart from the insights of the assessments, his willingness to be open and respectful (that is, to be a coach) with his employees contributed greatly to his success.

My client was very pleased with the outcome of the exercise. He said, "I cannot believe the effect this exercise had on the key managers. One spin off that I was not expecting was that I unstuck them from

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the business and that they are all excited about change. This makes my job of guiding improvement much easier now."

Conclusion

Managers can increase their staff members' motivation by:

- 1) Helping them discover and articulate the internal motivations they feel and
- 2) Collaborating with them to find ways to align their personal motivations with the organizational goals.

This process requires that the manager listen well and observe carefully while maintaining an attitude of acceptance and openness that encourages staff members to reveal their inner motivations. There are many different assessments, exercises and lines of questioning that the manager can use, but the key to success is the non-judgmental and positive attitude that allows people to feel comfortable and proud about who they are and what they want.

- 1 Harvard Business Review on Motivating People, 2003, A Harvard Business Review Paperback, Harvard Business Review Publishing Corp. ISBN 1-59139-132-6
- 2 For more information about Harrison Assessments, please see www.spaxman.com.hk/personality.html

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Angela Spaxman of Spaxman Ltd . works with business people, professionals and managers who want to be at their best and be completely themselves at work. Her clients could be accelerating their learning about management and leadership skills; inspiring, empowering and developing their team members or creating careers or businesses that suit them perfectly.

Angela has been coaching full time since 2000 and has 12 years of experience in the people-development field as a coach, corporate trainer and consultant. She is a graduate of Coach U, a Certified Practitioner of Neuro-linguistic Programming, the Founding President of the Hong Kong Coaching Community and a Board Member of the International Association of Coaches.

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