How do I motivate my administrative assistant?

“My administrative assistant has worked here for a little over a year. She is personable with good clerical skills. She’s a good clerical worker, but she never really rises above that position. She never has an original idea for organizing the office. It’s as if she is waiting on me for every idea. And when I give her a suggestion, she will do it for a week or two but then stop doing it. Maybe I'm expecting too much, but I thought an admin would be more self-motivated and focused on assisting me. I asked her to please organize the office when she arrives in the morning. I'm not talking about vacuuming the rugs and washing windows. I just want her to have an idea of what is piling up in the office, and what is important and what is junk. She feels that this is treating her like a maid. Any advice?” — Frustrated Boss

Ernest Lee Petefish April 15, 2013 at 5:11 pm

reference for my earlier post is
Upper Saddler River: Prentice Hall.

Ernest Lee Petefish April 13, 2013 at 3:04 pm

I agree with the first part of Lynnete Baker’s post on (April 9, 2010 at 3:39 pm), but not the last sentence. I would like to add some more to that. Your admin needs to have some goals, some sense of accomplishment. In your posted issue, you hit on a critical topic. Take a look at this, "I thought an admin would be more self-motivated and focused on assisting me" “I”, and “me”. Yes she is working for you and you are paying her to perform tasks. Is she really working for you or for something else? People are motivated differently for different reasons. First I would suggest having take the Jung Typology test. Have her provide you the four letter type she came up with. You can read up on the personality type by doing a Google search. Mine is “ISFJ”. This can give you some insights on her personality and what may make her tick.

Once you identify some of her buttons you can leverage that with one of the motivational theories. Key Factors to understand are: your leadership abilities, her personality traits, communication and interpersonal skills, her goals not yours. You already know what your goals are. Make it your mission to mentor her. There were leaders in my life that I would have charged a machine gun bunker for. It doesn’t need to be that intense but you get the picture.

Try the Expectancy Theory by Victor Vroom. Hitt, Black, & Porter(2012) explains the theory like this, The Theory proposes two kinds of beliefsEffort = Performance (E -> P Belief), high effort leads to good performance, and Performance = Outcome (The P -> O belief) is the probability that a particular level of Performance will lead to a particular outcome or consequence like, “If I succeed, will I get praise from the boss.” Start with something as simple as acknowledging that without her, the office would fall apart and that everything she does is vital to the offices success. Its all in the perception of being needed at that point.
Show some interest in her life, what she does, what her hobbies are. Make simple comments on a topic that interests her. You don’t have to be her best friend, but when you show her that she is an intricate part of not just your success but hers as well, she will most likely bend over backwards for you.

Admin123 April 22, 2010 at 1:08 pm

How did she get the job in the first place? Make sure the person who hired her gets help on the filtering process for future candidates since they are easily charmed!

Debbie April 21, 2010 at 12:22 pm

Or maybe the poor girl’s brother was suicidal like mine was.
It never hurts to go a bit beyond the work facade and try to meet the real person and their needs as well.

Lana April 19, 2010 at 4:58 pm

Wow! That’s helpful.
I’m glad I didn’t have to work with anyone who felt that way when I had to seek work following my husband’s death.

JayBee April 16, 2010 at 5:17 pm

One thing no one has addressed so far is the possibility of a “culture clash”. In our diverse society different cultures have differing expectations; even word definitions can be at odds. Expectations of ROLES within a culture-group can also be very different. That could also cause the type of disconnect being described by the response to your request to “organize the office” as being taken as being “treated like the maid”. This is a trickier area to navigate.

Jacqueline M. Walters April 16, 2010 at 1:38 pm

Enroll your Administrative Assistant, in a course, for her to learn how to be an administrative assistant. Some people experiences difficulty learning the rudiments of the job requirements with out formal training.

DeeCee April 14, 2010 at 4:54 pm

I agree with Deb. Not everyone is “Administrative Assistant” material. First sit down with her and very explicitly describe what you are wanting in an assistant. Then ask her if she wants to move in that direction. If she has no desire to do that then you will probably need to find someone else who does. However, she may like the idea but lacks self confidence. If so, let her know you’ll support her and help her get training to become a great assistant. Send her to seminars, subscribe to Administrative Professional Today, give her access to this forum, have her join (or visit) IAAP meetings, etc. If she sees this as a positive thing (working as a team, being an “assistant”, not a maid) she may be enthusiastic about it. Good luck with whatever you end up doing. All bosses should be so fair.
Deb April 13, 2010 at 11:27 am

I believe not everyone is cut out to be an administrative assistant. It can be a very stressful job. One has to be attentive, motivated, organized and committed to the person they are supporting. You have to always be on top of everyone and everything. Maybe this assistant just doesn’t have the skills to support your individual needs. I personally would make every attempt to help support her become the assistant you are looking for but when all is said and done, if she fails to live up to you expectations, you may be better served by someone else in that position. I know of many people who are hard workers and aim to please but absolutely do not belong in the position of an administrative assistant. Good luck!

Donna April 13, 2010 at 11:11 am

I agree with Patty, an admin can wear many hats depending on the supervisor and the expectations of the position. My concern in this case is that the admin does not seem motivated enough on her own to think of doing the “extras”. Going the extra mile can not only benefit the supervisor, the group and the company, but the admin herself when her review comes around. If you put forth the extra effort, it will be rewarded eventually! Not to mention you will feel like you did a job well done and for me that is satisfaction in itself! Feel good about yourself at work.

Patty April 12, 2010 at 9:36 am

Every supervisor/executive has a different expectation of what an admin assistant does. Also, every company has a different view of what a clerk does, versus what an assistant does. In my company, we have a clerical staff that looks after things like filling the copiers first thing in the morning, opening and distributing mail, as well as picking it up from various locations around the office.

As an admin professional, I have worked for many executives and managers and all have different expectations of what I am to do for them. For instance, I once worked with a director who was a micromanager, so his expectations of me were quite different from the other executives in the office.

Perhaps your assistant, has had similar circumstances in a former position. The fact that you say she is a good clerical worker, shows that she is comfortable performing those types of tasks. She will need some clear direction from you as to what you expect from her. Don’t just leave her to figure it out on her own. As someone said previously, be specific, and make sure you communicate with her in a way that she understands.

One of the presidents that I worked for a few years ago (in this same company) had much higher expectations of me, but he was very clear in what he needed and very explicit also. We had a wonderful working relationship and he still brags about me being the best assistant (partner) he had. Even though I had several years of experience when he came, none of it involved what he expected. But because I was a quick learner and he was very appreciative of every little thing, I learned a great deal from him.

Take the time to sit with your assistant and discuss specific responsibilities. You will know quickly enough if this is the right path for her, or not.

Good luck.

Mohan M Prasad April 9, 2010 at 8:44 pm

Perhaps you can help her with the following
> Having a daily to do list
> Asking her to think of one new suggestion a day and giving her a token reward; even a pat on the back
> Telling her that she has to move to the next level by end of the year (this may be a good wake up call to someone who is in the cozy comfort zone)
> Using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) techniques
> Having a weekly 10 minutes review to tell her what went well and what could have gone better
> Insisting that she maintain a dairy of activities with time and sequence

Mental drilling can create retention through repetition

I understand your challenges, but then if she is otherwise good it's our job to make her work wise good too

Mohan M Prasad

Fellow Admin Asst April 9, 2010 at 6:11 pm

Perhaps you can set a 1/2 hour weekly meeting with her. Have an agenda of expectations/tasks. Have her update you on the progress/completion of each task. Also include the items such as organizing the office. Tell her you need a system between the two of you to be able to approach her area where either of you can find something easily. Hopefully this will get her going and it will also keep you in the know on what she is or is not doing. Can you send her to a project management class?

Judy Kelley April 9, 2010 at 4:36 pm

I had this exact problem, so as the Office manager at review time I again went over her job description that she agreed to when she was hired. I emphasized that we are a team and she is an important part of the team, and all duties on her job description are to be carried out to keep the team functioning and the office in order.

Ronda April 9, 2010 at 4:04 pm

I am an Administrative professional who has been complimented on my ability to go above and beyond however I have worked with others who only do what they are told and no more. I believe they had an unfounded fear of getting in trouble, one secretary I worked with would say outright “no, they didn’t tell me to do that”. With that said and your statement about her thinking she is a maid leaves me to the conclusion that communication needs to be improved. Be very specific in giving directions and with your expectations, instead of saying organize the office, say open incoming mail, stamp in, put paper in the copiers, etc. In addition to eliminate any fears she may have about getting in trouble tell her it’s okay for her to take some initiative in things concerning organization, etc.

Sandra April 9, 2010 at 3:54 pm

You are great boss to even put up with such an assistant. The assistant’s main responsibility is to keep the boss organized and on track. I would suggest hive a briefing daily (if possible for about 1 month and then once a week to go over expectations and what is priority at this time). As the boss your time should be spent on other your other tasks and duties and coaching the admin should not be one of them. It really sounds like you need a more advanced admin then the clerical person you now have. Your admin is not the norm, she may need to find
Lynette Andrews Baker April 9, 2010 at 3:54 pm

A busy employer does not to be a babysitter, if after the employee is given enough time to get acquainted with the office routine and to establish his/her employer routine and likes and dislikes. If you have to have a meeting to enumerate your personality traits then the administrative assistant is insufficiently motivated for the task ahead. Further, character and personality traits should have been dealt with at the interview to see whether the interviewee has the necessary characteristics for the road ahead.

Go Hughes April 9, 2010 at 3:51 pm

“maybe I thought an admin would be more self-motivated....” Granted it is a key asset for an admin but it is not a given. Some people, including some admins, do not have the initiative gene in their chemical make-up. I agree with the other responses that you need to sit down with her and either present her with a job description based on what you need from her or ask her to work with you to write a job description that you can both agree on. Speak honestly with her about your “need” for her to “think outside of the box”, your expectations for her being able to see what needs to be done and not waiting to be told, to think creatively about ways the streamline the operation. The suggestion about shadowing another admin is also a good one if it is possible – maybe she just needs to see a real admin at work. At the conclusion of your “job description” meeting set a time frame for an evaluation 3 or 6 months later. All of these things should make a difference – if a difference can be made – if not, you may have to make a decision regarding her future as your admin. Being an administrative assistant, does not make you an administrative assistant.

Lynette Andrews Baker April 9, 2010 at 3:39 pm

Motivation comes from within. If you have to introduce incentives to motivate your employee then your employee is in the wrong environment. Normally, administrative personnel has a tendency to be very organized, detail oriented, meticulous, likes to plan tasks in advance and is very anxious to get tasks done ahead of time. The only motivation you can provide your administrative assistant is to help her find a routine job with mundane tasks.

Happy Exec. Admin. Asst. April 9, 2010 at 2:45 pm

I would explain to her that being an assistant means doing what is necessary to help you do your job better. Whether it be returning calls for you, sorting your “mail” based on importance, handling travel arrangements, making sure you eat (yes, I do that too), or any of the other “mundane” tasks you don’t have time for, it is her job if you decide it helps your office run smoother. In my experience, as time passes and my relationship with my boss grows, I find that I can anticipate better what will help her day run smoother and do it before she can ask. It is a matter of consideration and caring. If you have a drone who is just there for a paycheck, you may have to write out your needs in detail and call it a job description. Of course, my favorite is “...and other duties as assigned”.

Joan April 9, 2010 at 2:36 pm
Dear Anon2: What an amazingly self-aware and patient supervisor you are! I applaud you observation, plan of action, implementation and follow through with someone whose experience and education had produced a completely different life-approach from your own. You are a teacher and a mentor and this Admin –somewhere farther down the line in her life–will realize her good fortune to have worked for you so early in her career. Kudos to you!

Linda C April 9, 2010 at 2:30 pm

My suggestion would be to sit down with her and give her your expectations and then ask her if she has any questions concerning her duties as your assistant. Maybe ask her what it is about her job she likes and what things make her uncomfortable and why? You aren’t there to be her best friend but at the same time you have to have some kind of a rapport that works for both of you. Where I work, we have job descriptions and when someone is hired, they get a copy of that to help guide them through their job. If you are seeing that she is omitting some of those duties ask her to sit with you and review the job description.

Anon2 April 9, 2010 at 1:27 pm

Wow, that sounded like one of the admin assistants I use to supervise. For me, I realized that her personality, work style and motivation factors were different from my own and most of the other assistants in the office. I first gave our unmotivated admin a self evaluation and I also completed one on her. I decided to have an outside the office meeting with her so we could discuss on how she viewed things and how I and the Directors saw her work and abilities. From there, a plan was mapped out to work on different job functions in the office. I also, advised her that any directives would need to be written down by her, gave her the responsibility to re-write her detail job responsibilities, had her each week for the next month work with a different admin in the office to fully see their responsibilities and I also began giving her reasonable deadlines to complete projects that were assigned to her. I also realized that I had to be specific in giving directions to her. For example each morning when you arrive into work the copiers will need to be filled, coffee made, mail sorted, opened and distributed, check the calendars for meetings, etc.

Our unmotivated admin has been with us now for four years and is doing well, she knows what is expected and always follows through and will now ask if there are other tasks that need to be completed. I had to understand that she learned and was inspired differently from me.