

4 ways managers can cultivate intrinsic motivation

Motivated employees are more likely to be engaged in their work and determined to continue developing their skills and the value they bring to the organization.

But motivation is a subjective concept that comes in varying degrees—and all motivation is not created equal. Externally motivated employees, for example, are driven to work based on the potential for some type of external reward, like a bonus, time off or public acknowledgment or praise.

Intrinsically motivated employees, on the other hand, want to succeed because of the internal benefit they experience—like pride or perhaps the internal satisfaction of simply feeling they've been productive.

For long-term gains, managers should look to build the latter form of motivation in their workforce. (After all, if an extrinsically motivated employee is willing to work hard only for a monetary reward, they'll work at any job where they perceive the potential payout as better.)

Here are four ways science says managers can cultivate intrinsic motivation among their employees.

1. Give employees ownership over approach and outcomes. When employees direct their approach to their work and the desired outcomes, it paves the way for intrinsic motivation. Give employees the autonomy to structure their workday and make decisions, every step of the way. Offer support, but avoid micromanaging how they bring those ideas to life.

One study published in the journal *Motivation and Emotion* revealed that people who've experienced this type of autonomy-supportive leadership experience greater intrinsic motivation, workplace well-being, job satisfaction, loyalty, and engagement. They are also less likely to report feelings of job burnout.

2. Tell employees their perspective matters. Employees who directly engage with other teams and interface with clients are most likely to understand business challenges, strengths, and weaknesses. As the "front-line" team, they likely have ideas for improvement.

Few things kill employee motivation more quickly than an executive who explains a corporate vision or outlines a new process that doesn't reflect the reality employees face each and every day.

Encourage your employees to share ideas about opportunities to improve, and ask for their perspective regularly. Encourage them to make and own their choices about how a project or task is handled, as well as to help you understand why they feel it's the best course of action so you can learn from them.

Not only will their insights ultimately make you a stronger and more informed leader, but your employees will also understand that their outlook, experience, and decisions matter to the broader organization.

3. Avoid controlling behavior or goal-setting. A June 2019 study of employee goal-setting and achievement revealed that while employees' who felt they worked in an autonomy-supported environment were

more likely to set and embrace intrinsic goals, those who perceived themselves as being in a controlled environment took the opposite approach: They embraced only extrinsic goals that promised some type of external reward if achieved.

Avoid putting any type of reward program in place that encourages employees to make choices based on your terms instead of theirs. If your workplace requires that managers set goals for employees as part of a quarterly or annual review process, collaborate.

Ask employees to set their own goals first, and then discuss them together to arrive at a plan that satisfies the goals they've set, and puts them on the path to pursue opportunities you've identified to help them further develop.

4. Empower employees to control their time. Your workplace may have policies around formal working hours, but employees will be more motivated and accountable when you give them the freedom to choose when they work, and when they don't. Encourage employees to take the time to exercise, spend time with family, or simply take time off when they need the break—not when a formal schedule dictates they should.

Motivation is complex—but the ways managers can inspire it within their teams is not. Put these four steps into practice, and watch your team thrive.