How to motivate teams to improve performance

Back in elementary school, you might have encountered a teacher who made the class an exciting offer. If every student in the room passed the math test on Friday morning, the class could have an extra half hour of recess that afternoon. Armed with this incentive, you and your classmates likely upped your game. You buckled down and studied harder, both to get the reward and to not disappoint your fellow students. Some pupils may even have taken it upon themselves to help math strugglers learn the material. The challenge ultimately resulted in the teacher getting what she wanted — improved math performance.

People who manage adults, however, sometimes thumb their nose at such tactics. They do not wish to "waste" their time searching for ways to improve employee performance. They reason that getting a paycheck should be enough of a motivator for workers.

(For the record, if that paycheck is not up to industry standards, getting it there is one of the quickest ways to improve employee performance. Why bother pushing oneself to go above and beyond when you are already receiving inadequate compensation?)

Other leaders realize the immense importance of employee motivation to today's work environment, especially in light of the pandemic. Small businesses and large ones alike possess a vested interest in increasing job satisfaction in order to boost employee retention and encourage team members to tackle the hard work necessary to succeed in the current economic climate.

While no one-size-fits-all method exists to inspire your team, here are some powerful ways to enhance motivation levels.

Prioritize recognition and appreciation

What third grader does not enjoy receiving a gold star on a handwriting worksheet or hearing his grandparents gush about his performance in the school play? Such evidence that you are doing things right and that others notice your efforts feels great — and encourages keeping up the good work.

The desire for a pat on the back does not go away with age. In fact, research conducted by the Workhuman Analytics and Research Institute concluded that "showing more appreciation" is the top thing employees wish their managers did more often.

What might merit recognition or a hearty thank-you? Possibilities abound! A few to consider include:

- Exceptional productivity.

- Meeting a deadline.

- Instances where someone demonstrates the company's stated core values, such as honesty, innovation, teamwork, or going the extra mile for a customer.

- Consistent performance of behind-the-scenes or "unglamorous" work (thanking people for the "thankless" tasks gives these jobs validation and meaning).

People especially value recognition for things that are most important to them. An aspiring Major Leaguer will grin ear to ear when the teacher admires his monster home run but may not care quite so much when his spelling test makes the bulletin board.

To figure out where to target praise and other appreciation efforts, ask each staff member about his most valuable or unique contribution to the team. Then, make sure to note when this action or behavior occurs.

Of course, some situations always merit attention. If your company is one of the more than half of organizations out there that does nothing to acknowledge work anniversaries, correct this error. (How would an 8-year-old whose class failed to sing "Happy Birthday" feel?) Your business is missing out on a prime opportunity to celebrate longevity, commitment, and contribution.

Organizations oftentimes bestow physical mementos to mark milestones. Plaques, pens, clocks, and similar objects serve as a permanent symbol of achievement and appreciation.

General rewards come in all shapes and sizes. Some managers may hand out restaurant certificates, monetary bonuses, or even prime parking spaces. Many turn to experiential rewards for team performance, such as a

catered lunch, on-site massages, or a group wine tasting outing. Such perks provide the added benefit of team members sharing positive experiences, which enhances company culture.

And never overlook the motivational value of simply saying "thank you" on a regular basis. Send a heartfelt email or handwritten note acknowledging a specific action or contribution. Motivate employees even more by getting *your* boss in on recognition efforts. A personal letter from the head of the department or the company's co-founder is bound to make an impression.

As you consider recognition and appreciation efforts, always keep the receiver in mind. Let the individual's personality and preferences dictate. For instance, some workers love public acknowledgments. They beam at being singled out at a meeting or seeing their face displayed on an office bulletin board. Others cringe in the spotlight. They would prefer a more private expression of appreciation. Figure out how individuals wish to be recognized. Doing so will give your gesture greater impact and sincerity.

Expand their horizons

Just like a kid who shoots for A's because his parents give him a dollar for each one on his report card, extrinsic motivation propels some adults. However, not all motivating factors involve holding out a carrot. People of all ages also can possess intrinsic motivation, meaning they want to do something because it is challenging or interesting.

Team motivation can improve dramatically when managers encourage workers to grow. Mastering new skills invigorates the brain, builds confidence, and keeps employees from languishing in the same-old-same-old. In addition to boosting employee engagement, the organization gains a more skilled, knowledgeable workforce and a reputation for commitment to learning.

Developmental opportunities to consider include:

- Reimbursing classes.

- Sending people to industry seminars and professional conferences.

- Allowing time to watch pertinent TED Talks.

- Creating a lunchtime book club.

- Setting up mentoring programs.

- Encouraging team members to teach each other new skills.

Such developmental opportunities boost employee engagement. At the same time, the organization gains a more skilled, knowledgeable workforce and a reputation for commitment to learning.

Presenting challenges likewise provides a way to rev up interest levels. Aim to create stretch goals — one's just beyond the team's current capabilities. (If you set the bar too high, people will give up or burn out.)

Clear goals are a must. Workers need to understand what they are attempting to achieve and how they will

know if they have met the objective. Challenges also need a timeframe to spark a sense of urgency and keep everyone on task.

Sometimes, managers issue a general challenge and let employees figure out the best ways to meet it. This strategy encourages employee engagement through opportunities for creativity and decision-making.

Other leaders assist the team with goal-setting by breaking down the challenge into manageable chunks. Oftentimes, they employ the SMART method. Each letter in SMART stands for an important element of successful goal-setting: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant, and Time-bound.

Be certain, too, that workers know that their increased knowledge and their ability to meet challenges will pay off down the line. Offer a clear path to advancement. Seeing that today's actions will shape tomorrow revs up interest in the here and now.

Promote autonomy

Way too many children have experienced the following scenario when working on a school project. You enthusiastically come home with library books on dinosaurs and generate great ideas on how to make the visual for your report. Mom spontaneously jumps in with suggestions on how you might better construct your T-Rex. Dad replaces your handwritten labels with fancy ones done on the computer. Before you know it, you are sitting in the corner watching the adults work. The project looks nothing like you envisioned, and you no longer feel any excitement or pride.

Micromanaging bosses likewise throw a bucket of water on enthusiasm. Employees get the impression that management does not trust them or judges them as inadequate. And, besides, why bother putting forth much effort if someone else is just going to redo all your work?

Motivate your team by giving them a sense of ownership. They will feel respected, and they'll show appreciation of your trust by putting forth their best work. Likewise, acknowledge that people like control of their own time and energy. Flexible scheduling and remote work options further signal support of competent professionals capable of regulating their own actions.

Connection is still important

Do not, however, mistake extending autonomy for leaving people alone to fend for themselves. Workers need a support system in place to turn to when they have questions, want advice, or simply need assurance that they are doing their job correctly.

Managers who regularly check in with their teams show that they care about employees and are there to help as needed. According to the Workhuman Analytics and Research Institute study mentioned earlier, workers who check in with their manager at least weekly as opposed to never are more than twice as likely to trust their manager, nearly 5x less likely to be disengaged, and nearly 2x as likely to believe they can grow in the organization.

Build connections

Great things happen when people feel their actions make a difference. Just as each math student in the opening example knew his performance mattered, workers thrive when they see what they do as important.

Smart companies define their mission and values. They project a clear sense of purpose that permeates the work environment. They realize employees want to know why things are done a certain way, so they provide reasons behind initiatives and decisions. Savvy managers regularly ask employees to look at their individual

roles within the company and identify how their tasks contribute to operations. Workers internalize the message that they are important factors in overall success.

Richard S. Hawkes, founder of [Growth River](#) and author of *Navigate the Swirl: 7 Crucial Conversations for Business Transformation*, suggests creating a "Team Charter." This action further pinpoints how units within the company define their contributions. Gather colleagues to discuss foundational issues such as:

- Our team's purpose is . . .

- Our team's customers and stakeholders include . . .

- The outcomes for which we are responsible as a team include . . .

- The in-team commitments that we make to each other toward our team purpose include . . .

In addition to developing connections to the company, also look for ways to forge personal bonds. These connections create a sense of belonging and inspire people to do their best work for the sake of others.

Post-pandemic work scenarios make team building more vital than ever. Many remote teams are returning to the physical office. Others continue to telecommute or operate on a hybrid schedule. Strengthening workplace culture can help everyone regain a sense of togetherness.

Choose team-building exercises based on your organization's circumstances. Some to consider include:

- Volunteering as a group.

- Meeting for coffee or a happy hour (virtually or in-person).

- Establishing fun Slack channels to share pet antics, holiday decorations, cute kid photos, etc…

- Going on excursions such as a retreat or a field trip to a local museum.

- Taking online classes together, such as yoga or cooking.

- Competing against each other in friendly contests such as multi-player video games or trivia battles.

Not sure what your employees would like? Just ask. Giving people a voice in decision-making further builds up feelings of importance and belonging.

Provide the right environment

Finally, remember the thrill of a brand new pack of 24 Crayolas on the first day of school? You couldn't wait to dive into the endless possibilities they presented.

Similar motivation occurs when companies give workers the means to do their job well. Uncomfortable desks, a lack of natural light, wonky Internet connections, outdated software, a printer that always jams, a noisy work environment, and the like don't exactly spur excitement. Rather, they leave people frustrated and eager to head out the door.

Show you care by creating as pleasant a workplace as possible. Thoughtful upgrades improve office mood and support productivity. Extend the same consideration to remote employees by ensuring they have the tools necessary to fully perform.

In addition to these physical measures, work on creating a positive mental environment, too. Companies that respect the value of uninterrupted lunches, consistent breaks, and unplugging during non-work hours help employees get the time they need to recharge. As any fourth grader will attest, putting forth your best effort on an afternoon science lesson becomes much easier after eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich while discussing cartoons with your friends.