

## **Making Employee Motivation a Partnership**

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We begin our discussion of a complex topic with a simple question: How can I motivate my employees? We propose a simple yet unique answer: You can't do it alone! Employee motivation in small businesses works best as a partnership between employer and employees. In this paper, we will develop this basic argument into several practical take home suggestions for human resource managers and employees to use in improving employee motivation.

We recognize that employee motivation, more accurately the lack of motivation, often frustrates employers. It comes as a surprise to some employers that employees' lack of motivation often frustrates them as well. We observe these frustrations being compounded by the obvious fact that most any approach to motivation will sometimes work for some people. The kicker is that no approach works all the time for all people.

### **Some Background Points about Motivation**

Motivation is the inner force that drives employee behavior. The intensity of one's inner force to do a task or accomplish a goal describes the level of motivation. Two people may both say and believe they want to be excellent employees. The intensity of their desire to be excellent measures their motivation. Employers pay more attention to what employees do than what they say or believe. Motivation is the force that causes employees to deliver on what they say.

Most employees prefer to be motivated. Why would an employee choose the frustration of not being motivated? Motivating jobs and work environments win praise from employees. Of course, what one person finds motivating another may find boring, frustrating and debilitating. And employees sometimes bring a lot of baggage to the workplace from their childhood experiences, previous employment and failures to find their motivating niches in life.

Motivation is complex. No simple set of guidelines guarantees motivated employees. Motivation provides a never-ending struggle for both employers and employees.

Self-motivation plays a crucial role. Achievers tend to continue achieving. Past accomplishments, challenging career goals, expertise in one or more areas, pride in one's abilities and self-confidence contribute to self-motivation.

An unmotivated person can become motivated. On the other hand, a motivated person can lose motivation. The opportunity to motivate employees is never completely lost nor is the accomplishment of motivated employees ever guaranteed to continue indefinitely.

Not all performance problems are explained by lack of motivation. Lack of training can prevent a motivated employee from performing well. What sense is there in hiring a motivated person to do a job and then not training the person to do the job properly? Lack of appropriate equipment, tools, facilities and supplies can also prevent a motivated person from performing well. Lack of clear expectations, unclear "rules of the game" and muddled messages about desired outcomes can lead to poor performance.

### **Satisfying Needs**

The simplest and most intuitive approach to motivation is to satisfy an employee's needs. This approach has four parts:

- Employees have needs that they desire to satisfy, *which in turn*
- Leads to actions that will fulfill their needs, *which in turn*
- Leads to rewards from the employer and satisfaction from doing the job, *which in turn*
- Reinforces their actions and causes them to be repeated.

Note the necessity of identifying needs. An employer can get help from employees to identify their needs. Then the employer can choose the "right" employee rewards for doing a job and especially for doing a job well. Providing the "right" rewards reinforces the employees' actions thus causing the employees to repeat the actions to get the rewards again.

To illustrate, Kirk and Kendra are employees who both have a need to be thanked and appreciated. Kirk's employer Jennifer, recognizing the need, gives him specific tasks and responsibilities. When Kirk performs the tasks well, Jennifer regularly shows appreciation by saying thank you and giving merit increases in pay. Kirk's needs are satisfied. To continue having his need for thanks and appreciation satisfied, he is motivated to continue to do the tasks well.

On the other hand, Kendra's employer John fails to understand her need for thanks and appreciation. Kendra works hard to complete the tasks but John never thanks her or recognizes her accomplishments. Instead, John is quick to criticize Kendra's small mistakes. He offers no thanks or recognition for her correction of the mistakes. At some

point, Kendra is likely to lose motivation to continue to do the tasks well. The reason according to this simple needs theory of motivation is that no need is being satisfied.

Note also the necessity of an employee being willing and able to perform the assigned tasks. Unwillingness, for whatever reason, to perform the tasks, means the link between needs and rewards breaks down.

This simple model of motivation makes clear that employee needs play a critical role in motivation. Experienced labor managers, however, easily see practical problems. What at first seems to be a simple model is in fact complex and difficult to apply. Motivation success requires more than the employer's sole reliance on satisfaction of needs. Reinforcement of desired behaviors and cooperation between employer and employee need to be added to the power of needs.

### **Positive Reinforcement**

Positive reinforcement encourages the repetition of desired behavior. In contrast, punishment discourages undesired behavior. Lack of positive reinforcement discourages employees and causes loss of motivation. Positive reinforcement is a powerful tool when used consistently, fairly and sincerely.

We can return to the Kirk and Kendra example of the previous section. Jennifer is making effective use of positive reinforcement to motivate Kirk. In contrast, John's blindness to the importance of reinforcement causes Kendra to lose motivation.

### **A Partnership Between Employer and Employee**

We return to our basic argument – employee motivation works best as a partnership between employer and employee.

Synergy is the concept that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Synergy is exactly what we seek to complement the needs approach and positive reinforcement. It means that employer and employee working together accomplish more than they accomplish by each working alone. Lack of synergy in motivation occurs when employee and employer each face the motivation challenge alone. Employee brings his or her self-motivation, experience, good intentions and training to the job. Employer brings his insights about employee needs and rewards.

The motivation partnership means that both employee and employer are committed to synergy rather than waiting for the other to solve the motivation puzzle. The employer and employee share responsibility for motivation, i.e., cooperation not separation.

### **The Employee's Contributions to the Partnership**

True partnership between employer and employee in the motivation challenge requires each to understand and play their parts well. The employee's most important contribution to the partnership is self-motivation. Most importantly, this self-motivation commits the employee to making the partnership work. Employees also need to search for a job and work environment that fit their knowledge, skills, abilities, needs and interests. A miscast employee almost certainly will eventually face the frustration of waning motivation. No matter how good the fit is between employee and job, the employee must be willing to learn. Even the most experienced employee new to a farm or ranch should bring admission that "I don't know all I need to know." A highly skilled employee still needs to learn about new coworkers, policies, rules, norms of behavior and just how things "work around here."

Taking a job with a new organization means commitment to that organization's vision, mission, core values and goals. When an employee's goals, needs and beliefs don't fit with the employer's vision, mission, core values and goals, any proposed partnership between employer and employee is almost certainly to disappoint both parties.

The employee has the responsibility to communicate his or her needs, concerns and ideas to the employer. Listening to the employer's point of view is the other side of this communication coin.

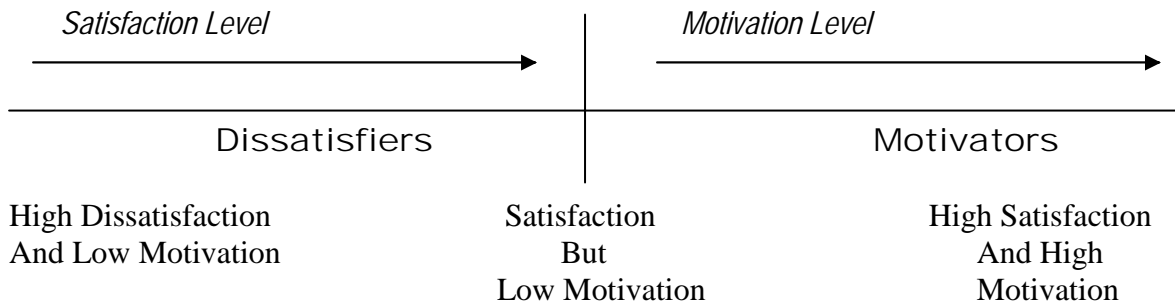
### **The Employer's Contributions to the Partnership**

Frederick Herzberg developed a two-factor theory of motivation that makes clear what the employer can bring to the motivation partnership. According to Herzberg, two factors affect employee motivation: dissatisfiers and motivators. The employer has primary responsibility for both.

Examples of dissatisfiers are poor working conditions, unsafe equipment, exhausting physical work combined with excessively long work days and weeks, unfair pay, disagreeable supervisors, unreasonable rules and policies, unchallenging work and conflict with co-workers. According to Herzberg, these problems must be resolved before motivators can work. Resolving the problems increases employee satisfaction; however, it does not provide motivation.

Motivators are factors that influence job satisfaction and lead to motivation. Examples include achievement, recognition, satisfying work, responsibility and personal growth through training and new experiences. These motivators turn an employee from being neutral about the job into a motivated employee. (Figure 1)

**Figure 1. Diagrammatic Representation of Satisfaction and Motivation Levels**



The implications for the employer's side of the motivation partnership are clear. The dissatisfiers must be removed before motivators can work. Employees working in unsafe conditions with unfair pay will not be motivated by recognition and delegation of additional responsibility. However, making the workplace safe and increasing the pay to a fair level is not enough. These steps alone will fail to motivate employees. They will be satisfied but not motivated. These neutral workers can be turned into satisfied and motivated workers by using the motivators, e.g., recognition and delegation of additional responsibility. Each employer can work to identify the dissatisfiers among his or her employees. Removing the dissatisfiers provides opportunity to take advantage of motivators

Figure 1 illustrates the path to providing an environment where employees should be enthused about contributing their part of the employer-employee motivation partnership. When the employer is not contributing their part of the partnership many or most employees will be on the left side of the figure -- highly dissatisfied and poorly motivated.

The employer must first remove the dissatisfiers like unfair levels of pay and unacceptable working conditions. Employees will move toward the center of figure as their level of dissatisfaction decreases. They will not yet show many signs of becoming motivated.

As the employer continues to implement her or his part of the partnership by providing motivators, e.g., positive reinforcement, recognition for achievement and increased responsibilities, most employees will move to the right of the figure. They are responding to the employer's fulfilling his or her part of the partnership by providing a motivational work environment.

Note that this is not a time when the employer jumps from the left to the right of the figure. The employer must first focus on removing the dissatisfiers.

Communication with employees is essential. What is a dissatisfier for one employee may not be a dissatisfier for another. A single workaholic employee may have no objection to a 60-hour workweek. Parents with small children may find 60-hour workweeks highly dissatisfying. What is a motivator for one employee may not be for another. Opportunity to learn new skills may be motivating for one employee and a worrisome burden for another employee.

### **Additional Implications for Employers**

#### **Employer's Role in Job Design**

Employers need to design jobs with employee motivation in mind. Uninteresting or boring jobs will certainly be dissatisfiers. Employers can capitalize on the advantages people see in farm and ranch work. To illustrate, people who love animals are motivated by the opportunity to work with animals. Some people like machinery much more than animals. Some enjoy repairing machinery more than operating it. Some people like office work; others want to be outdoors.

Managers have the primary responsibility for designing jobs. They first need to take into consideration the tasks that must be accomplished for the farm or ranch to succeed. They can also take into consideration what individuals want in their jobs. Sometimes relatively minor changes in job design can dramatically improve a job in the employee's view, e.g., changing a calf feeder's job to include explanation of calf care to farm visitors.

#### **Work as a Motivator**

The job itself can be a motivator for an employee. First, jobs should be designed whenever possible to encourage employees to use a variety of skills. Think about why assembly line jobs tend to be boring. Standing in one place using only one or two skills doing the same thing over and over is not motivating for most people. One of the reasons that many people like varied work is that they get to use a variety of skills.

Second, jobs should be designed whenever possible so that an employee performs a total job, e.g., all aspects of calf raising as contrasted with just feeding. Even such a simple task as repairing gates may be more motivating if one person has the responsibility to do everything including determining what parts are needed, buying parts, taking the gate apart, replacing parts, reassembling and testing to be sure everything is in order.

Third, jobs should be designed so that the employee understands the significance of his/her job to the business. Why is calf raising important? What contribution is the person making by doing a good job with calves? What problems are caused later on if the calves are not given proper care? The person taking care of calves should have answers to these kinds of basic questions.

Fourth, jobs should be designed so that each employee has responsibility, challenge, freedom and the opportunity to be creative. This requires the supervisor or owner/operator of the farm to delegate some authority. Delegation can be a powerful motivator. “You can do the job however you want as long as you get results.” Such words, such delegation, such responsibility can have positive impacts on employees.

Finally, supervisors should incorporate feedback into each job. Most employees want to know what is expected of them in the job, how they are doing, how they can improve, what latitude they have in changing how they do their tasks, what should be discussed with a supervisor and when the discussion should occur. Employees rarely complain about too much communication with their supervisor. They often want more communication.

## **Teamwork**

Teamwork has the potential to be either a dissatisfier or a motivator. Some individuals have a high need for power. Some are “loners.” Some have had bad experiences in previous employment with cooperative effort. Some are reluctant to share honest assessments of coworkers. For each of these types of employees, teamwork, especially ineffective teamwork, may be a major dissatisfier.

On the other hand, some people with a high need for interpersonal relations may see teamwork as a major motivator. Some may also see their own needs for achievement being satisfied best through close working relations with their coworkers.

Employers need to emphasize team building if teamwork is to be more than a hollow slogan. Teams are built through four stages: forming, storming, norming and performing.

In the forming stage, team members break the ice with each other, become oriented to the employer’s business goals and begin to exchange ideas. The forming stage is particularly important when integrating new employees with established employees, and family members with nonfamily members.

Storming is the stage of conflict, open disagreement and the surfacing of conflicting ideas. Managers face the challenge of getting disagreements out in the open for discussion and resolution. Hidden disagreements constrain trust and growth of the team.

Norming follows from resolving conflicts. Team harmony and unity arise. By this stage, the leader is clearly identified and team members’ roles are clear.

By the performing stage, the team is functioning well. The team solves problems for the good of the business and team members. The team is involved in decision-making.

Any one of these stages can be the bottleneck that prevents teamwork from becoming a motivator. Clearly, teamwork can fail to bring about synergy. The true test of teamwork as a motivator is whether employees accomplish more working together than they accomplish working alone.

### **Diversity in the Workforce**

With increased employment of non-traditional workers whose values, cultures, norms and experiences are unfamiliar to the employer, identifying dissatisfiers and motivators becomes increasingly difficult. The opportunity to work overtime may be perceived by the employer as a motivator while the employee perceives it as a dissatisfying interruption of plans to attend an auto race with friends. Having the opportunity to eat lots of cold pizza, listen to loud music and drink large quantities of soda at 10:00 p.m. may seem to be a dissatisfier to the employer but a motivator to teenage employees. Giving an employee the opportunity to “read” an instruction manual for a new piece of equipment may be highly frustrating and dissatisfying to the functionally illiterate adult worker even though the employer thought it would be a motivator.

### **Chalking the Field**

We have all participated in sports and watched sports on television. When we watch a baseball, basketball, soccer or other game we know what the field of play is, what the rules of the game are and which team is winning. We also have officials who enforce the rules of the game and provide consequences – fouls, time in the penalty box, ejection – when those rules are not followed.

In your business there is no automatic standard set of rules of the game, definition of winning or penalty for not following the rules. One of the employer’s responsibilities in the motivation partnership is to define the field, outline the rules of the game and determine when individuals and the team are “winning.” We call this chalking the field. The employer must also be the “official” in the sense that he or she provides the consequences when the rules of the game are not followed or the expectations are not met.

Now think about a game where the players do not know the rules or the official is not enforcing the rules or the official is enforcing the rules inconsistently. When this happens, the players become very frustrated and the game is less well played and less interesting to watch. Sometimes the players become so frustrated that there are many ejections or fights break out.

Now think about the employer’s role in chalking the field for the employees. When they do not know what is expected and the consequences are not consistently implemented, employees become frustrated and lose their motivation to “play the game.”



## **Summary**

Having motivated employees is a highly worthy goal for any employer. No human resource challenge likely exceeds worker motivation in importance or potential for employer and employee satisfaction. We have presented a nontraditional approach – making motivation a partnership challenge. We have made satisfaction of worker needs, positive reinforcement and removal of impediments to motivation a joint responsibility of employer and employee

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