Why Your Employees are *LOSING MOTIVATION—* & What to Do about It

Eight proven practices to fire up the troops

By David Sirota, Louis A. Mischkind, & Michael Irwin Meltzer

Most employees are enthusiastic when they start a new job. But their morale often declines after their first six months—and continues to deteriorate for years afterward. The fault lies squarely at the feet of managers. Our research has shown how managers' behaviors contribute to the problem—and what they can do to turn it around.

Three Key Goals of People at Work

To maintain employees' enthusiasm, managers must understand the three things people seek from their work—and then satisfy these goals:

- **Equity:** to be respected and treated fairly
- **Achievement:** to be proud of one's job, accomplishments, and employer
- **Camaraderie:** to have good, productive relationships with fellow employees.

If just one of these factors is missing, employees are three times less enthusiastic than workers at organizations where all elements are present.

What Managers Can Do

Satisfying the three goals depends on both organizational policies and managers' everyday actions. The following eight practices will support employees' need for achievement, equity, and camaraderie.

1. Instill an inspiring purpose. A critical condition for employee

> To maintain an enthusiastic workforce, managers must meet all three goals.

enthusiasm is a clear, credible, and inspiring organizational purpose—a "reason for being" that translates for workers into a "reason for being there."

Stating a mission is a powerful tool. But equally important is the manager's ability to explain the reason behind the mission. Managers of stockroom workers, for example, must do more than tell employees that their mission is to keep the room stocked. They must communicate how important the job is to those inside and outside the organization who rely on the stockroom being properly maintained.

2. Provide recognition. Managers should be certain that employee contributions, both large and small, are recognized. The motto of many managers seems to be, "Why should I thank people for doing what they're paid to do?" Workers repeatedly tell us, with great feeling, how much they appreciate a compliment. They also report how distressed they are when managers don't thank them for a job well done yet are quick to criticize them for mistakes.

A pat on the back, a dinner for two, some schedule flexibility, a paid day off, a flower on a desk with a thank-you note, or a simple "good going" are a few of the hundreds

of ways managers can show appreciation for good work. Such actions work wonders if they're sincere, sensitively done, and not considered a substitute for fair and competitive pay.

3. Be an expediter for your employees. Incorporating a command-and-control style is a sure-fire path to demotivation. Instead, redefine your primary role as being your employees' expediter: It's your job to facilitate getting their jobs done.

How do you know what employees need from you in order to do their jobs well? Ask them! If you can't immediately address a particular need or request, be open about it and then let workers know how you're progressing at resolving their problems. This is a great way to build trust.

4. Coach employees for improvement. The best way to help employees improve their performance is to provide meaningful feedback. Here are keys to a basic feedback plan:

- *Give feedback as soon after the occurrence as possible.* Remember that performance feedback isn't the same as an annual appraisal. Use the formal appraisal to summarize the year, not surprise the worker with past wrongs.
- *Recognize that workers want to know when they've done poorly.* Don't be afraid to give appropri-

> Deal decisively with the 5% of your employees who don't want to work.

ate criticism; people need to know when they're not performing well. At the same time, don't forget to give positive reinforcement. It is, after all, your goal to create a team that warrants praise.

• **Make your requests for improvement specific,** factual, unemotional, and directed at performance rather than at employees personally. Avoid overall evaluative remarks ("That work was shoddy") or comments about employees' personalities or motives ("You've been careless"). Instead, provide concrete details about what needs to be improved and how.

• **Keep feedback relevant to the employee's role.** Don't let your comments wander to anything not directly tied to the tasks at hand.

• **Ask employees for their views of problems.** Their observations can be invaluable in deciding how to deal with performance issues, including how you can be most helpful.

5. Communicate fully. Frustration with inadequate communication is one of the strongest feelings workers express in surveys. What people need in order to do their jobs dictates that very few restrictions be

> Redefine your primary role as being your employees' expediter.

placed on the flow of information. Hold back nothing of interest to employees except those very few items that are absolutely confidential.

Schedule regular employee meetings with no purpose other than two-way communication, and seek continual feedback about how well you and the organization are communicating. One of the biggest communication problems is the assumption that a message has been understood. Follow-up often finds that messages are unclear or misinterpreted.

6. Face up to poor performance. Identify the 5% of your employees who don't want to work. Then deal decisively with them. Most people want to work hard and be proud of what they do. But some employees are, in effect, "allergic" to work; they'll do just about anything to avoid it. A disciplinary approach—including dismissal—is about the only way to manage them. It will raise the morale and functioning of other employees to see this obstacle to their performance removed.

7. Promote teamwork. To be done effectively, most work requires a team approach. Research shows repeatedly that a group's efforts in areas such as problem solving are usually superior to those of individuals working on their own. In addition, people gain a motivation boost from working in teams.

Whenever possible, organize employees into self-managed teams, giving them authority over matters such as quality control and scheduling. Create opportunities for cross-learning and diversity of ideas, methods, and approaches.

8. Listen and involve. Employees are a rich source of information about how to do a job better. This principle has been demonstrated time and again with all kinds of employees—from hourly workers doing the most routine tasks to high-ranking professionals.

Managers who operate with a participative style continually announce their interest in employees' ideas. They find opportunities to have direct conversations with individuals and groups about what can be done to improve effectiveness.

Once they've defined task boundaries, participative managers give employees freedom to operate and make changes commensurate with their knowledge and experience. There may be no single motivational tactic more powerful than freeing competent people to do their jobs as they see fit. ■

David Sirota is chairman emeritus, Louis A. Mischkind is senior vice president, and Michael Irwin Meltzer is chief operating officer of Sirota Survey Intelligence. They can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu. This article is adapted with permission from Harvard Business School Working Knowledge (www.hbswk.hbs.edu).

> If just one factor is missing, employees are three times less enthusiastic.

Keep Up the Good Work

For more on creating an enthusiastic staff team, see these *Nonprofit World* articles at www.snpo.org/members:

• **How to Ignite Entrepreneurial Spirit in Your Organization** (Vol. 20. No. 5)

• **The Key to Building Productive Teams** (Vol. 21, No. 4)

• **Overcome Organizational Indifference** (Vol. 24, No. 2)

• **Regular People, Spectacular Results** (Vol. 23, No. 4)

• **Use Employee Ownership to Motivate People & Gain Revenue** (Vol. 22, No. 4)

• **How to Conduct Discipline Interviews** (Vol. 24, No. 6)

• **The Organizational Personality and Employee Performance** (Vol. 21, No. 1)

> There may be no single motivational tactic more powerful than freeing competent people to do their jobs as they see fit.