



Motivating Volunteers?

Forget the Carrots & Sticks



By Stephen C. Rafe

Our usual ways of motivating people don't work. Here's what does.

Volunteers are rarely offered financial incentives, so “carrots” in terms of physical rewards (money, trophies, the boss’s parking place for a month, and so on) aren’t usually an issue in that sense. And while “sticks” may seem to work at times, they’re also counter-productive. This is especially true with people who have the option of quitting.

Fallout

Yet, in the workaday world, carrot and stick approaches continue to prevail despite the fallout associated with each of them. Both involve external or “extrinsic” actions based on what others are doing *for* individuals or *to* them.

After receiving carrots (rewards) for a while, people come to expect them. These rewards then actually demotivate people’s achievement drive. They come to simply do what’s expected of them. They may start cutting corners to make deadlines, budgets, or productivity targets.

Sticks (real, threatened, or implied punishments) are demotivating from the start and are known to cause paid workers to “cheat” (alter reports to look good, for instance, or even to sabotage to “get even”).

True Motivators

Author Daniel Pink cites numerous studies supporting the idea that neither carrots nor sticks work very well, or at least not for long (*The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us*, Riverhead Books). He

“Keep the goal from becoming an obligation.”

points out that the “elements of true motivation” are internal or “intrinsic”: They come from within the individual.

These elements are consistent with Abraham Maslow’s levels in his “hierarchy of needs.” The five intrinsic needs that all people seek (once their physical needs for food, shelter, and the like are met) are:

1. **autonomy:** ability to direct their own work
2. **mastery:** the desire to gain experience and get better at what they do
3. **purpose:** the broad, overarching reason for the work
4. **esteem:** confidence, achievement, respect for others, and respect by others
5. **self-actualization:** the need for creativity, spontaneity, problem-solving, acceptance, morality, and lack of prejudice.

“Acknowledge that some of the tasks are, quite frankly, boring.”

Neither carrots nor sticks help meet any of these vital needs. The carrot and stick approach is based on the concept of contingency: “If you do (this good thing) then you’ll get (this good thing) or, conversely, “If you don’t do (this good thing) then you won’t get (this good thing) or you will get (this bad thing).” That formula does nothing to connect to people’s internal motivators.

The Solution

So then, what can you do to ensure that people’s intrinsic needs are met? The answers to these questions may suggest a way:

- **Why do people do something for “nothing”?** And, what is that “nothing”? Could it be recognition? The desire to make a difference? The desire to serve? To master a challenge? To do something just for the fun of it or the mere satisfaction of doing it?
- **In terms of volunteers’ values, how important is quality?** And how do we know?

If extrinsic motivators don’t work, what *does* work? Here are some proven answers:

- **Provide support, encouragement, and development** of the five intrinsic needs listed above.
- **Practice transformational leadership (persuasion)** rather than transactional leadership (directing or ordering). Whether you’re working with volunteers or paid workers, studies conclude that “selling” or convincing (transformational) is far more effective than “telling” or commanding (transactional).
- **Show people the “big picture.”** Communicate it clearly, consistently, and often.
- **Let them complete the task** their own way.
- **Help them see that the task or project** is, or can be, “interesting, challenging, and absorbing” (as Pink puts it).
- **Strive to keep the goal from becoming an obligation.** When people feel obliged, their drive toward self-actualization tends to deteriorate.
- **Clarify** what constitutes a success.
- **Share a vision of the task** that’s consistent with the organization’s mission, goals, and objectives.
- **Make sure that your organization’s values and culture** match individuals’ expectations.
- **Acknowledge** that some of the tasks or some parts of the tasks are, quite frankly, boring. Offer logical reasons for why such tasks have value.
- **Offer plenty of learning, training, and development opportunities.** Let people choose what *they* want to learn. Encourage them to pick the learning methods that work best for them (whether it’s distance learning, in-person workshops, or the many other approaches available).
- **Enable, empower, and encourage people to work their way through the process,** one success at a time. 

Stephen C. Rafe (stephen@rapportcommunications.net) is president of Rapport Communications (rapportcommunications.net), a consulting and coaching firm specializing in behavior-based communication (written and spoken), which he founded in 1986. Author of three HarperBusiness books on presentations and interviews, he has held executive positions in the nonprofit sector.



Looking Inward

For more ways to lead volunteers (and paid employees) with internal motivators and help them be the best they can be, see these articles at NonprofitWorld.org/members:

How to Change the World by Changing Your Culture (Vol. 31, No. 2)

Creating a Values-Based Road Map (Vol. 23, No. 2)

Reach Out & Touch Someone: The Many Faces of Distance Learning (Vol. 20, No. 2)

Leading from Feeling: Coaching Tools for Interpersonal & Organizational Excellence (Vol. 27, No. 1)

The Nonprofit Executive as Chief Learning Officer (Vol. 16, No. 2)

Keeping Your Best and Brightest Workers (Vol. 28, No. 6)

How to Present Training Workshops that Educate and Inspire (Vol. 21, No. 2)

Motivating Volunteers to Perform (Vol. 31, No. 5)

Not Taught in Business Schools: How to Cultivate Creative Leadership (Vol. 24, No. 5)

Values for Volunteer Viability (Vol. 30, No. 1)

Training Programs Need More than Good Information (Vol. 21, No. 2)

Grounded Visioning: A Quick Way to Create Shared Visions (Vol. 26, No. 4)

How to Create a Motivating Environment (Vol. 28, No. 5)

Keep Your Volunteers Happy with Dynamic Training (Vol. 31, No. 4)

Also see Learning Institute programs on-line: Volunteer Management (NonprofitWorld.org/LearningInstitute).