

## Insider Insight

# How to Effectively Motivate Your Team

By Stephen Balzac

Once upon a time there was a software company developing an innovative data management tool. When it started, everyone was excited about the product and eager to be part of such a novel project. Three years later, the software was on the market. Naturally, everyone was ecstatic and eager to buckle down and produce the next version.

Well, not exactly. Yes, the product was on the market; after that, the tale had an unhappy ending. Over time, all that energy and motivation steadily eroded, a result of poor planning, long hours, overly optimistic deadlines, interpersonal conflict, a bad habit of “motivating” by moving from crisis to crisis and other stressors.

Certainly the company could have done better at reducing or eliminating some of the stressors that eventually led to its failure. However, in any competitive industry, there will be factors that erode the motivation and job satisfaction of employees. Reducing them as much as possible is a good start, but it isn't enough. The company cannot control the economy, for example. Therefore, it's vital to actively increase motivation. There are several practices companies can employ:

### Create a Vibrant Vision of the Future

Remind people why they became excited in the first place. Refresh and revise that vision as the project evolves, so that everyone always remembers what they are working to accomplish. Encourage employees to imagine success; daydreaming is a powerful way for people to stay in touch with their — and the company's — long-term goals. Microsoft lost its way only after it changed its famed vision of a “PC on every desk and in every house.”

### Become a Major Motivator

Managers need to act as coaches and cheerleaders, helping employees maintain focus and remain upbeat even when

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things are going poorly. Managers must help the employee build confidence, establish routines, and set realistic, difficult goals. They need to remind employees of past successes, not past failures. The latter only decreases motivation and confidence. If managers do not already have the necessary skills, the business needs to see to it that they acquire them. Managers who are glorified individual contributors will not be able to fill this role, and the entire team will suffer as a result.

### Look Outside the Company

Encourage employees to join professional associations and network with their peers. Online social networks are a good start, but face-to-face interaction is valuable as well. Make it possible for employees to meet with customers and hear from them how they will benefit from the company's product or service. It's easy to become discouraged when working for a faceless “other.” It's easier to become excited when the person you are helping has a face. Finally, encourage employees to attend industry trade shows and conferences; sure, it may take them out of the office for a few days, but it also helps them keep tabs on their field and expand their knowledge.

### A Family Focus

Putting a picture of a spouse, kids, family or close friend on their desk is another powerful motivator for many people.

Research shows that such a picture motivates people to work harder and more persistently at accomplishing their goals.

### Reduce the Unpleasantness

Don't allow unpleasant tasks to fill the day. No matter how enjoyable the job, some of the work is really not much fun. If the unpleasant parts fill the day, motivation swiftly declines. Instead, allocate a chunk of time each day to performing unpleasant tasks: when you promise yourself you'll work on something for “an hour,” you're more likely to continue well past that than if you leave the time open-ended.

### Take Breaks

Although this may sound counterintuitive, stepping away from your work is one of the most powerful means of making progress. An hour break to go to the gym can yield greater progress in solving a problem than eight hours spent banging one's head against the wall. People who take vacations experience significantly less burnout than those who do not.

### Promote Outside Activities

Encourage employees to take hobbies seriously. Strange as this may sound, people who are devoted to a hobby or sport are more productive, not less. Knowing practice is at 7pm means there is greater motivation to finish work on time. Leaving time for practice, whether or not the work gets done, actually increases motivation to do more the next day. It's when there is nothing else on the schedule that work expands to overflow the time available.

As the saying goes, success is a marathon, not a sprint. Keeping motivation alive and well is key to crossing that finish line. ■

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