

You can't motivate people, but you can create an environment that encourages them to be motivated.

Getting the Best Out of People in the Workplace

Les Landes

Managers are notorious for their plaintive cry, “How do I motivate my people?” While the intent of that question is understandable, its answers seldom work because they are rooted in a fundamentally flawed view of human nature in the workplace. Three key factors underlie that misguided view.

First, managers need to understand that unless you've taken in slaves or God has taken you in as a partner, they are not *your* people. They are independent, competent adults who expect to be considered with respect, and they will respond negatively if they are treated like children or chattel.

Second, people cannot be motivated. That's because *motivation is intrinsic*. You can give people *extrinsic incentives*, but if those incentives don't resonate with what already matters to people—with what people are inherently motivated by—they will have no affect. If

someone feels a compelling pull to be a musician, for example, it will be tough to get him motivated to do the work of a lumberjack—and he's not likely to be very good at it. So managers must identify and tune in to the uniquely motivating spark that lives within each person if they want to get optimal performance.

Third, what managers often mean when they ask that desperate question is this, “How can I get the people who work for me to do what I want them to do in the way I want them to do it?” That kind of egocentric view of management is doomed to failure from the start because it assumes that managers have all the answers. If there's one clear and positive lesson that the quality movement has given us—flawed as it has been itself—it's this: Every single *body* in the workplace also comes equipped with a *brain*. Any organization that fails to take advantage of both from

every individual in a systematic and comprehensive way is sub-optimizing the potential of its employees for exceptional performance.

Once managers come to terms with those three basic tenets, they can ask the more relevant and appropriate question: “How can I get the best that people are willing and able to contribute to the success of this organization?” Here are several keys to achieving that goal.

Appropriate Aptitude, Skills, and Knowledge

Aptitude is an intrinsic quality. Skills and knowledge are acquired. When it comes to *aptitude*, it’s important to make sure that a manager isn’t trying to put a square peg in a round hole. It’s important that there is an inherent match between a person’s aptitude and his or her job. When it comes to *skills and knowledge*, a manager needs to do a thorough assessment of what the gaps are, and then set up appropriate learning and development plans for each individual. Those plans should be based on both what the organization needs from that individual and what that individual aspires to do within the organization.

Clear Goals, Expectations, and Responsibilities

A manager has to give people a clear line of sight to where they’re heading, what is expected of them, and what the individual’s responsibilities are both for specific situations and overall duties. Otherwise, there’s a good chance the individual won’t meet the manager’s expectations. The more a manager defines goals and expectations, the more likely that the desired outcome is achieved. A manager will also find that communication is much easier and more effective.

Meaningful Rationale and Benefits

When a manager tells people to do something, they are likely to have a couple of basic questions, such as “Why should I do it?” and “What’s in it for me?” How a manager responds to those questions will have an important bearing on whether or not that manager gets buy-in from people. If the only reason people are doing things is because they are being told to do them, they won’t bring their best effort and energy to the task—and they won’t have adequate perspective on the implications of what they are asked to do. People also are more likely to speak unfavorably about the task to others. A clear win-win rationale almost always produces a more productive response.

Well-Defined Processes

If people don’t have clearly defined processes for the tasks that they’re expected to do, they are likely to struggle with how to carry out the tasks. That’s particularly true of tasks they don’t do every day and even more so if it involves working with people from other departments. Whether those processes are developed with support from their managers, or people create them on their own, well-defined processes are essential. They provide the road map for consistent execution of the tasks people are assigned to perform.

Support Structures

Even if people know the goal, what’s expected of them, and the processes for getting there, they are not likely to perform well if they don’t have the necessary support. That support might include resources, funding, people, communication tools, the right working environment, management endorsement, clearing obstacles, etc. Whatever it may be, people are more likely to perform the way that managers want if people get the support they need to achieve the goal.

Guidance System

Getting to where you want to go—or where you’re supposed to go—requires some tools to make sure you are on the right path. First, people need measures. If a manager wants people to accomplish a certain task with specific outcomes within a given time period time, people need explicit information about those expectations. Then they need some type of communication system to let them know on a regular basis if they are on target or not. Finally, they need a preset mechanism or process for taking corrective action if they are off course. Some people call it “scenario planning,” and the rationale is simple. If people wait until they hit a roadblock before they decide how to overcome it, the response will be slower, and the results are likely to be less effective.

Constructive Accountability

Most responsible adults have no problem with being held accountable for their actions. However, if the only tool a manager has for holding people accountable is punishment and criticism, a manager will never get the best performance out of people. A manager has to start by assuming that most people want to do a good job. If an employee’s performance slips, then it’s important to approach that person as the *source of the solution* rather

than the cause of the problem. That means a manager acknowledges that the person didn't mess up on purpose, and that the manager trusts the person to analyze the situation and get performance back on track. People may need coaching to assess the problem and develop the solution along with support in implementing it, but either way, the goal is to acknowledge the problem without recrimination and give people responsibility for fixing it.

Patience and Reinforcement

Sometimes people just don't seem to "get it." No matter how many times managers guide, support, and instruct them on how to do something differently, people seem to fall back into old familiar patterns of behavior. It's important to remember that changing old habits is not easy for most people. It takes frequent repetition before people can become comfortable with it, and they need support and encouragement when they get off track. As long as there is a genuine willingness to improve, and as long as the aptitude is there, patience and reinforcement usually pay off in the long run.

In the end, there is one compelling reason that people do not robotically toe the line and slavishly step to the march of the managers who oversee their work. It's because people are imprinted at conception

with the uniquely human gift of *imagination*. It is the source of all innovation and inspiration and is capable of incalculable accomplishments. Yet despite its enormous power, imagination is also extremely fragile, and it will die quickly in a smothering environment that fails to nurture it with support and encouragement.

More than anything else, getting the best out of people means getting the most out of their *imaginings*. For an organization to optimize that awesome force, it must understand that imagination is not something that can be extracted from employees. Rather, imagination is a gift that can only be given by people who are supported in the pursuit of their own inspired motivation.



Les Landes is president of Landes & Associates, providing services in the areas of strategic planning, marketing and public relations, employee engagement, organizational communication, and performance improvement. His articles, speeches, and interviews have appeared in numerous publications including

Communication World, The Public Relations Strategist, Executive Speeches, Training, Total Quality Newsletter, Quality Progress, and Strategy and Leadership. Landes can be reached at leslandes@landesassociates.com.