

Influencing Employee Motivation

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Motivating employees is one of the most challenging activities that managers engage in within the study of organizational behavior. We define motivation as “the process by which a person’s efforts are energized, directed, and sustained toward attaining a goal,” (Robbins & Coulter, 2012, p 430-431). Yet, as managers, energizing, directing, and sustaining employee efforts is much easier said than done. A manager cannot motivate people as they motivate themselves; however, a manager can create the environment and conditions necessary to influence employee motivation.

The Importance of People

In his book, "Seeing the Big Picture - Business Acumen to Build Your Credibility, Career, and Company," Kevin Cope identifies five key business drivers--**cash, profit, growth, asset utilization, and people**. Cope writes, “People are an important resource for any company. Employees and customers are two important stakeholders to your business” (p.92). To maximize the effectiveness of people as business drivers, employee motivation is an

important consideration. Motivated employees help organizations to profit and grow through the achievement of goals and objectives. Thus, both academic researchers and practicing managers have been studying employee motivation for years. In any leadership situation, it is important to understand people, context, and culture (Weiss, 2012). For example, the authors suggest a set of 3 questions to assess motivational readiness.

1. Do employees know what is expected of them?
2. Do employees have the knowledge and skills to meet expectations?
3. Are employees willing to provide the effort to meet or exceed expectations?

The first two are “can-do” questions which indicate if a worker has the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform the task at hand. The last is a “will-do” question which provides a starting point to assess how employees perceive a task and their attitudes and motivations toward completing it. Understanding people and what drives them is an important component of the leadership process. “Boundaries for Leaders,” Dr. Henry Cloud (2013) offers some insight on the dynamics of leading people and building employee/manager relationships. “Leaders lead people, and it is the people who get it all done. To get it done, they have to be led in a way that they can actually perform. If you are trying to lead people and do not establish effective boundaries, employees will not be able to do what you need or want them to do because their brains can't work that way” (Cloud, 2013, p.25). In other words, Cloud is saying that leaders need to create a culture that allows people to perform at optimal levels.

Theories of Motivation

Both content and process theories of motivation can help managers to better understand what influences employee motivation. *Content theories* assume that there are FACTORS within an individual that energize, direct, and sustain behavior; while *process theories* describe HOW behavior is energized, directed, and sustained to give energy or excitement to a task. Let’s look at several theories to see how they apply. **Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs:** This content theory identifies five levels of human needs—physiological, safety, belonging, esteem, and self-actualization. These five levels comprise a motivational system. When one need is met, an individual will move on to the next need until they achieve their full potential or self-actualization. Do you lead or manage employees who have these needs? Where do most of your employees fit? **Herzberg’s Motivation-Hygiene Theory:** Herzberg’s content theory altered the way we perceive how workers are energized by looking at what employees want from a job, i.e. what characteristics of a job are satisfying. For example, do employees feel a sense of achievement at work? Is that achievement recognized? Do employees have a positive perception of their work? Advancement opportunities? Salary, status, and security? These factors influence employee motivation to maintain a high level of productivity and achieve goals and objectives. In an unsatisfactory work environment, lost work time, injuries, and employee turnover prevail, negatively impacting the organization’s bottom line. Have you experienced an unsatisfactory work environment? If so, what outcomes emerged? **Vroom’s Expectancy Theory:** This process theory is based on the assumption that individuals make conscious choices about their work behavior based on expected results. Vroom suggests that as long as employees believe

there is some reward, benefit, or incentive to gain in achieving goals, they will be motivated to work toward them (Reilly, Minnick, & Baack, 2011). In Vroom's theory, the basis for motivation is threefold. If these three factors align, then employee motivation will be high.

- **Expectancy** - effort will lead to the intended task performance
- **Instrumentality** - task performance will achieve an expected result
- **Valence** - the result has value to the individual

Locke and Latham's Goal Setting Theory: This process theory suggests that setting clear goals and providing meaningful feedback will increase employee motivation. The authors advocate that today's workers are eager to participate in shaping work, achieving goals, and growing professionally. When goals are clear, challenging, and involve task complexity combined with commitment and regular feedback, they improve the chances of success. The acronym **AMP** summarizes the theory.

- A goal **ALLOWS** us to increase our focus;
- Goals **MOBILIZE** us to work towards something;
- Goals increase our **PERFORMANCE**.

Clearly, mastery of the principles addressed here is not a guarantee of management success. However, possessing a working knowledge of a variety of theories, and a clear understanding of at least one, can improve your potential for creating a work environment and conditions necessary to influence employee motivation.

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