

The Motivation Myth

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“How can I motivate workers to do their best? We offer competitive wages and great benefits but it doesn’t seem to make a difference. Why do so many of my employees seem to do only the minimum to get by? What am I missing?”

If you read management books or, God forbid, went to seminars titled “How to Motivate Your Workforce,” you were led to believe that you can create motivation in people. Perhaps you were told that a formal recognition program “motivates” people. Another advisor suggested sweetening your benefit package. Still another consultant claimed that a “Mission/Vision” statement would “motivate” everyone to work toward your business goals.

While there isn’t anything wrong with that, it won’t motivate anyone since motivation remains an *internal* force. Remember, everyone has needs and will be motivated to meet those needs. Motivating factors vary from person to person depending upon their situation in life at any given time. In our society, people expect many of their needs to be met through their employment.

Various sociologists have studied group behaviors in the workplace. (Nice to know what people do with those sociology degrees, isn’t it?) There are many theories about what motivates people at work. In my opinion, the one who has come closest to reality is Abraham Maslow. In the 1970s, he published his “Hierarchy of Human Needs” theory. His theory explains a progression of needs from basic needs (food, shelter) to an upper level of needs (independence, self-expression) in five levels. Essentially, a person cannot be motivated to a higher level until needs at a lower level are met.

The easiest way to explain how employment plays into these motivational needs is to tell a story. Let’s say you hire a new person, Ima Worker, as an Accounts Payable Clerk. Ima has been looking for a job for about two months so she is thrilled when you hire her. (This meets her first level needs for food, clothing and shelter.) Ima performs well and, at the end of the Introductory Period, you give her a small increase in pay and enroll her in various benefit programs. (This meets her second level needs for safety and security.)

Ima gets along well with everyone and is a “team player.” This, in part, is the result of meeting those lower level needs so she can strive to meet the next level of needs – social needs. These needs include group acceptance, being part of a team. But, after two years, you notice a subtle decline in her work performance. As a good manager, you sit down with Ima to discuss some small problems that have arisen.

Ima is apologetic but finally admits that she feels her work is underappreciated (remember, needs are about feelings and men have them, too). She isn’t unhappy about money or benefits, and she has good relationships with her co-workers, but the work no longer seems interesting. (This is level four, where esteem needs include a sense of accomplishment, recognition and self-respect.) At this point, Ima reminds you that she

does have a degree in Accounting and would like the opportunity to use her knowledge and experience in a more productive way.

Now you are in a quandary. You don't want to lose Ima, but you don't know what to do to make her job more rewarding. After all, Accounts Payable is what it is. So, you ask Ima what she thinks needs doing and how she would propose doing it. (By involving her in the planning process, you also meet the highest level need for self-realization, including planning your own work and expressing creativity.) This turns into a win-win situation. Ima is happy and you are getting some projects done.

Whew! You met every one of the criteria for Maslow's Hierarchy of Human Needs and you did it with great success. But now Ima tells you that her husband has lost his job. She is worried about the bills and wants to talk about a raise. It appears that you may be back at level one.

That's the problem with trying to motivate people. You can spend a great deal of time and energy trying to "motivate" your workforce but, in the end, what motivates one person may have no effect on the next. It may be more productive to think about how you can avoid DE-motivating workers.

We will continue to look at this topic and others in a series of articles about management and supervision. Stay tuned. If you have suggestions, complaints, questions or any input for this column, please call me on the HR Help Line at 800-683-3440 or e-mail lesley@taxfavoredbenefits.com.