MOTIVATING THE DEMOTIVATED.

Checklist 221

» INTRODUCTION

A growing body of research evidence supports the common sense view that employees who are engaged with their work and keen to do it to the best of their ability are more likely to produce good results than those who are bored or uninterested. Demotivated employees can also exert a negative influence on others, with repercussions for team morale, and ultimately the organisation as a whole.

Understanding the motivations of other people is key to unlocking their best efforts. As a manager, you can be a motivating or de-motivating factor for people in your team. The team atmosphere you create and the relationships you build will be of key importance in earning the discretionary effort and co-operation of team members. So, be supportive and encouraging, build relationships and trust, listen and provide meaningful and regular feedback as well as seeking opinions, and make work challenging and interesting. People may be motivated more by problems than targets, so be innovative and try different approaches.

Some would argue that when people appear to be unmotivated, it is just that the right motivational triggers have not yet been found. Different people are motivated by different things. So it may largely be a question of identifying what you have not been getting quite right and working on what makes the apparently unmotivated tick. Ultimately, as a manager or leader you cannot create intrinsic motivation in an individual, they must find the drive from within themselves. You can, however, adopt a leadership style and create a climate that will make this more likely.

This checklist offers advice for managers who feel that a team member appears demotivated and wish to improve levels of energy, commitment and morale. For further guidance see also our checklist on motivating your staff in a time of change.

» DEFINITION

Motivation is the creation of working environments and incentives that enable people to perform to the best of their ability. The aim of motivation is to engage people with the work they are doing, in order to achieve the best possible outcomes for individuals and the organisation as a whole.

Motivation can usually be categorized as ‘extrinsic’ – arising from external motivators such as financial rewards – or ‘intrinsic’ – arising from the internal desire to achieve or contribute. It is thought by many experts in occupational psychology that intrinsic motivators are more sustainable and tend to lead to better, more holistically valuable, performance.

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» ACTION CHECKLIST

1. Find out what does motivate your employees

Get to know the members of your team. The better you know them, the more effective you can be in managing them. Try to form an objective view of what matters to the members of your team and what drives each individual. You may have been trying to motivate them in ways which mean little to them.

Try asking questions such as: 'What's important to you in your work?', 'What annoys you?' 'What do you enjoy doing?' and 'Has anything changed lately?'

Listen carefully and note down what you hear. You can expect to hear typical responses such as:

a) **'Being appreciated for what I do and achieving something'** – in this case try to find out what kind of appreciation they mean – for example, promotion, bonus, public praise and recognition, private recognition, more responsibility, new tasks or job security.

b) **'Doing a good job and enjoying** myself' - ask what enjoyment means to them - working with people they like, completing projects on time, not being stretched?

c) **'Solving problems'** – for example, being the expert or developer, motivating others to get things right, managing and organising, or solving problems as a team. Which stage of problem-solving do they enjoy most - developing new ideas and concepts, implementing solutions, or organising and supervising?

Now reframe their work in terms of what it is that motivates them. Remember that what is motivating for some may well be de-motivating for others.

You may gain understanding by reflecting on the possible barriers to motivation for an individual or a team and then working systematically to remove them.

2. Use their own words

Once you have identified what's important to a team member about their work, use their own words to guide you in what you say to motivate them. Let's look at some examples:

a) '**Being appreciated for what I do and achieving something**'.

Here, you will need to tell the individual how much you appreciate what they do. Talk to them in terms of what they are going to achieve rather than what you want them to do. For example:
'We need to sell five thousand of these by the end of the year. how can we do that?' rather than, 'You will need to prioritise and sell more of these.'

b) '**Doing a good job and enjoying myself**'.

In this case you probably need to ask what they mean by doing a good job. Most people think they know, but it varies from person to person. If necessary, make suggestions as to what they may mean, for example:

i. 'Finishing what I started at the beginning of the day'
ii. 'Having satisfied customers'
iii. .'Doing the job to the best of my ability'.

You also need to find out what they enjoy so you can work out how to help them to enjoy their work.

c) '**Solving problems and making sure things don't go wrong**'.

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This person likes solving problems, so you will need to talk about work issues as problems, again using their language. This is someone who may well not be motivated by goals and targets. This individual will be delighted if you tell them you have a really difficult problem to solve and no one else can fix it. Sometimes, one individual's negativity is another's positivity. By using reverse psychology and informing someone of what could go wrong, you may in fact be able to motivate them to do a better job.

3. Treat all your team members as individuals

Remember that people are different. So find out exactly what an individual wants and what you can do to help them.

In the first case:

i. **'Finishing what I started at the beginning of the** day' - Here you can ask what would help them to achieve this.

ii. Next, **'Having satisfied customers'** - you need to find out who the individual thinks of as their customers and how they can be satisfied. It may be that they are already satisfied but the individual is not aware of this.

iii. Lastly, **'Doing the job to the best of my ability'** - you will need to find out what the individual means by this and how it can be measured.

Your employees are a team, so consider also what will motivate them as a team as opposed to other teams. Which incentives can you set at the team level to increase team cohesion and performance? Individual and team motivation need to go together. Which level you seek to address will depend on your analysis of the current situation, the tasks at hand and the goals you need the team to achieve.

Motivating teams is a key strategy for integrating unmotivated individuals. As a rule people do not want to be left out nor stand out too much. So if you manage to find incentives that motivate most of the team, an unmotivated employee is likely to make at least some effort.

4. Set clear goals and take time to communicate them

Having clear goals is one thing; making sure that they are effectively communicated and understood may be quite another. It may be that apparently demotivated employees are not so much unmotivated as uninformed. Leaders may be under the illusion, that because they themselves are familiar with organisational goals and targets, their team members understand them as well. Often, this is not the case.

Take time to explain organisational and team goals and objectives and make sure that everyone understands them and is clear about how their own work is linked to and contributes to achieving them. Identifying personal drivers and incentives means that you can allocate responsibilities to people in their areas of interest and match their strengths to their work.

Problems can also arise when individuals are not clear about their personal objectives or when conflicting objectives are set. Check for goal incongruence, especially where employees are members of more than one team.

5. Offer help with planning

Similarly, once objectives are clear you need to help individuals work out the small steps needed to achieve them. In some cases objectives can be so big and frightening that individuals struggle to identify the steps that will help them to achieve them. Ask them to think about what it is they need to do. If they come up with only large tasks which seem daunting, help them to break these down into smaller, more manageable tasks. But bear in mind that some employees, will be more motivated if they do all the planning themselves.

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6. Involve individuals in coming up with solutions

When asking someone who you feel is not particularly motivated what it is they want or need, they may well only respond by telling you what it is they don't want. There may be different reasons for this negativity but try to follow up on negative remarks by asking questions designed to identify what they do want.

Answer: "I do not want to work on this project."
Question: "What sort of project do you want to work on?"
Answer: "One that's not like this."
Question: "Would you like more responsibility / independence / resources / scope etc?"
Answer: "More independence…."

7. Try to get buy-in

Provide opportunities for individuals to choose for themselves which tasks to undertake. People are far more likely to be motivated to achieve something when they don't feel that a task has been imposed on them. Involvement and participation generate buy-in and ownership. Conversely, if people's views and ideas are not reflected in how projects are taken forward, they are likely to feel that either no one is listening, or that solutions are being generated that do not make use of their contribution and experience. Either way de-motivation can set in.

8. Make sure the rules are clear

Have you ever embarked on a project only to find that the goal posts have shifted? Weeks into the project you are told that you need to change what you are doing because of some ground rule, or constraint, or working method which was not made clear initially. Clear briefings on ground rules and procedures are as important as communication about goals.

9. Be innovative and try a different approach

People who appear demotivated may be motivated more by problems or potential difficulties than by goals. If you happen to be the kind of person who talks about goals and targets, what you say may fail to get their attention. It's not that they don't care, it is more that it just does not press their buttons. So, describe the problems you need to solve rather than talking about targets. An effective technique is to tell such people that things are really difficult or impossible. Odd as this may seen, this can often be a powerful motivator. It is important to note that:

- People with high self-esteem and high perceived self-efficacy are motivated by problems and negative feedback. Because they are resourceful, they see it not as criticism, but as a challenge, and it will increase their motivation to succeed.
- People with low self esteem and low self-efficacy will be even further demotivated by negative feedback. They absolutely need positive goals to work towards.

So you need to treat individual employees differently according to their personality and approach.

10. Consider alternatives

Having tried a number of different strategies without success, you may decide that an alternative approach would be more constructive in the long term. A person who is persistently negative and demotivated can have a demoralising and detrimental impact on the whole team. You may decide that they are more suited to a different type of working environment. Look for ways to encourage the employee to explore opportunities that will suit them better and enable them to find a greater sense of achievement and fulfilment in their work.

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» POTENTIAL PITFALLS

Managers should avoid:

- making assumptions about what motivates individuals
- assuming the same approach will work with everyone
- allowing demotivated individuals to damage team morale and performance
- micromanaging.

» ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

The happy manifesto: make your organization a great workplace, Henry Stewart,
London: Kogan Page: 2012

Beyond the call: why some of your team go the extra mile and others don't show, Marc Woods and Steve Coomber,
Chichester: John Wiley, 2012
This book is available as an e-book.

Manager's guide to motivating employees, Anne Bruce,
New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2011
This book is available as an e-book

Polar bear pirates and their quest to engage the sleepwalkers: motivate everyday people to deliver extraordinary results, Adrian Webster,
Chichester: Capstone, 2011
This book is available as an e-book

The progress principle: using small wins to ignite joy, engagement, and creativity at work, Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer,
Boston Mass.: Harvard Business Review Press, 2011

The why of work, Dave Ulrich and Wendy Ulrich,
New York NY: McGraw-Hill, 2010

How to motivate people, 2nd ed., Patrick Forsyth,
London: Kogan Page, 2010

Drive: the surprising truth about what motivates us, Daniel H Pink
New York NY: Riverhead Books, 2009

This is a selection of books available for loan to members from CMI's library. More information at: www.managers.org.uk/library

JOURNAL ARTICLES

How to lose staff and demoralise people, Rebecca Burn-Callander,
Professional Manager, 2015, Winter, pp 42,44, 45

Revolutionising motivation, John Berry,
Training Journal, October 2014, pp 10-13

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Roles and challenges, Pam Jones, Jan Rabbetts and Viki Holton,
Training Journal, April 2013, pp 50-55

Optimal motivation, Susan Fowler,
Training Journal, March 2012, pp 35-39

Values and purpose, Roger Moore,
Training Journal, October 2012, pp 35-36

RELATED CHECKLISTS

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RELATED THINKERS

Chris Agyris: the manager's academic (19)
Frederick Herzberg: the hygiene motivation theory (01)
Elton Mayo: the Hawthorne experiments (05)
Abraham Maslow: the hierarchy of needs (09)
Douglas McGregor: theory X and Theory Y (26)
Victor H Vroom: motivation and leadership decision making (44)

» NATIONAL OCCUPATIONAL STANDARDS FOR MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP

This checklist has relevance for the following standards:

- Unit DB4: Manage people's performance at work
- Unit DD1: Develop and sustain productive working relationships with colleagues

» MORE INFORMATION

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