

## Four Ways to Improve Employee Motivation

Our economy is strengthening and will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. Over the past year, the U.S. economy has averaged new job creation of greater than 250,000 jobs per month, resulting in an unemployment rate of 5.5%.<sup>1</sup>

The economy has not experienced unemployment numbers this low since May 2008, and only now are the numbers at what experts from the Federal Reserve Board consider to be healthy (between 5 and 6%<sup>2</sup>). The growing economy and low unemployment are creating a need for qualified workers that is increasing slowly but surely.

Talent management professionals and business leaders are once again faced with challenges we have not seen since before the great recession: not only increased competition in recruiting the best talent, but also retaining the current workforce. The latter is especially important when you consider that the average time to fill an open position in February 2015 was 28.6 working days, nearly double what it was at the height of the recession.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, according to data from a Saba study conducted by Harris Poll, nearly one-third (32%) of employed adults are currently looking to leave their jobs, and of the other 68%, 3 in 10 would consider doing so if they got the right offer.<sup>4</sup>

As the economy improves, so must our retention strategy, which means we must examine how we engage, develop and relate to our current workforce. Equally important, we must focus on those leaders within our organizations that have the most high-touch and direct impact on employees — the front-line managers. They are the most important leaders within our organizations because they have the most frequent number of touch points with individual employees. These business leaders have the most influence and ability to impact our company's retention as well as development and engagement efforts.

## The Science of Employee Motivation

Any type of workplace engagement is based on the unwritten social contract between employers and employees, and how our managers interact with our workforce has direct effect on not only employee performance but also productivity and engagement levels. Improving employee engagement begins with understanding what motivates your employees.

Susan Fowler, one of the foremost experts on motivation, defined workplace motivation as feelings or emotions that lead employees to act with positive or negative intentions. So if motivation is based on feelings and emotions, then it's clearly highly personal, and no two people will be motivated by exactly the same thing. Fowler says that the key to any type of motivation starts with understanding what motivates the individual. Fowler's research of over 25 years is outlined in Ken Blanchard's 2015 Optimal Motivation Report.<sup>5</sup>

The key is for organizations to start at the foundational level with their front-line managers who are in the position to not only engage employees, but focus on what motivates them. Fowler describes two outlooks for assessing motivation: suboptimal and optimal motivation.<sup>6</sup> Suboptimal motivation relies on pressure or even incentives like money or a prize. These do produce results in the short term, but as they encourage the right behavior for the wrong reasons, over the longer term, they leave the employee disinterested and alienated. Fowler compares these types of motivation to junk food, enticing, easy, and even tasty, but not a healthy or effective choice, especially for the long term.

On the other hand, optimal motivational outlooks are aligned to the employee's values and thus inherent to their self. More like high-quality health food, they drive sustained, long-term motivation. With optimal motivational outlooks, people complete tasks because it's the right thing to do or because they enjoy the work.

Fowler's research also demonstrates a positive and significant correlation between individuals with optimal motivational outlooks and work intentions. These individuals are far more likely to have higher discretionary effort at work and higher intention to perform at peak levels. They are also more likely to endorse the organization as a great place to work, and are more likely to remain with the organization and be happy and productive employees.

Understanding what motivates your employee population is critical. Since every person has unique feelings, motivation is personal, and that's why the front-line manager is so important. They are uniquely positioned to understand what motivates each person on their team. With this in mind, the manager and employee can align tasks and responsibilities accordingly. By doing so, managers can dramatically impact the productivity and engagement of their employees.

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Underscoring much of Fowler's work is the notion that you must trust the employee, rely on their competence and give them autonomy. Doing so will make it easy for them to choose to engage and produce. By helping frame tasks and projects so they align with the employee's values, managers can make a significant impact. Of course, managers have to know their employees to engage and motivate them, and they can accomplish this by taking a personalized approach in their communication, engagement and employee relations efforts.

Here are four tactics that I have found effective for improving a manager's relationships with his or her employees.

### 1. Consistent Conversations

Communication between a manager and his or her employees must be consistent and ongoing. These conversations don't have to take hours but must occur regularly weekly or even daily, depending on your work environment, business targets and existing relationships. One of my favorite approaches is to schedule time to just wander into the workplace or facility floor. It's important to be seen by your team. It has proven to be an effective way to build relationships.

Management By Walking Around, or MBWA, is a term first used at Hewlett Packard in the 1970s when managers wandered around the offices casually bumping into and talking with employees.<sup>7</sup> I would simply schedule 30–60 minutes of MBWA once or twice a week. Spend much of the time building trust and getting to know employees. These conversations don't have to be lengthy or planned to be effective; they just need to be intentional and focused on building a personal relationship with employees.

### 2. Prioritize Relationships

Front-line managers are busy. I completely understand that, which is why I recommend prioritizing the conversations and relationship efforts to maximize our own personal productivity. This can mean simple, ongoing meetings — between 5 and 15 minutes — with team members. Be focused, but remain personal. Start the conversation by asking them about something that's important to them. Maybe it's their favorite NFL team, television show or vacation spot.

It's in these moments that the most important job of a front-line manager is to listen. Employees will tell you through their personal stories and hobbies what their optimal or suboptimal motivation outlooks really are. It is from here that you can customize a personalized employee incentive program or development plan for them that suits their individual motivational needs.

### Rethink How You Communicate to Engage Your Team

A sales manager at a local beer distributor was having a hard time keeping his sales team engaged and motivated for their early morning weekly sales meeting. Discussing new products in meetings as well as follow up emails weren't helping his team succeed. His team wasn't asking questions during the weekly sales meeting. Throughout the entire hour they just stared down at their mobile phones, lifeless, until the manager decided to take advantage of the technology. The sales manager began implementing group text messaging asking questions, sharing resources and requesting feedback. The engagement level skyrocketed, as did knowledge retention! By using text messages to share resources and ask questions, he was able to re-energize and engage his team in a completely new way.

### 3. Personalizing Your Program

Front-line managers often think personalization is time-consuming and takes a lot of effort. While it takes some work, focus and organization, building relationships and personalizing programs is well worth the effort. Using technology to further develop the relationships and trust-building efforts can be as simple as sending a text message offering encouragement to a team member or a quick call between meetings to check in on a project. Managers must leverage existing technology instead of relying on old paradigms.

In addition to mobile technologies, one new technology you should consider is machine learning. Systems with machine learning built in automatically process far more data than a whole team of people can, and can provide personalized recommendations for learning, development and career growth. Machine learning makes personalization possible, even (and especially) in very large organizations, while also accelerating employee development in areas that you might not have considered or even overlooked. The employee data and daily activities stored within a talent management platform help establish and identify the skills or topics uniquely of interest to a given employee. This is especially useful for organizations that are experiencing hyper growth and/or increased turnover as knowledge workers retire or voluntarily leave. By finding employees with similar goals, interests and activities, the software helps identify potential successors and serves up to them opportunities for growth. The recommendations that the system generates can be complementary as well as supplementary to your established training, development and high-potential programs. With the power to accept or reject each recommendation, employees are fully

in control of their development. Front-line managers can take advantage of this self-directed development opportunity to keep employees engaged and growing in areas that are beneficial to the company.

### 4. Increasing Touch Points with Technology

Technology is a great way to unify and support a front-line manager's existing engagement and employee relationship efforts. Optimize your efforts by using channels and technology that support and enforce a manager's existing communication channels. For managers to be most effective, they must get creative. They must implement measures that resonate with employees and suit them over the manager's personal preferences.

Failing to take advantage of machine learning and other available technologies is the equivalent of turning your back on otherwise powerful ways to engage and build trust with employees, and most importantly motivate those front-line employees. By the same token, don't limit yourself to new tools. Consider using existing tried-and-true technologies that you may already have available. Many talent management platforms have collaboration/sharing technology built right in. Share important instructions and tutorials using your company's existing video or web conferencing meeting or even instant messaging platform technology.

## Conclusion

We have simply entered an employee-centric marketplace. Forecasting into 2017, the Federal Reserve says there are no signs of the new job market growth slowing. As business leaders, we have a limited window of opportunity to begin to drive a fundamental cultural change within our organizations. This means rethinking how we motivate, engage and retain employees by re-evaluating our methodologies and tactics. Right now is the time to get your managers to find out what motivates their teams on an individual basis through conversations, and then personalize their goals and development plans. Improving how we encourage and motivate our employees will not only help with retention, but also build a more positive work experience and culture.



For more ideas on how to engage and motivate your workforce, check out the **Coaching and Development Playbook**, a new eBook from Saba.

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