Motivating Factors

Instead of guessing what motivates individual employees, managers should start out by asking them. **BY MICHAEL ROSENTHAL**

Michael Rosenthal is the CEO of Consensus (**www.consensusgroup. com),** a negotiation and conflict resolution firm headquartered in New York and with regional offices in the Middle East that offers an array of services through three practice areas: Consulting, Training & Development, and Peace Building. For more information, contact **mrosenthal@ consensusgroup.com**.

Q I am a Training manager supporting our organization's largest business unit. Given the economy, we haven't been able to offer much in terms of bonuses and other perks in recent years. My client has asked me to teach managers how to motivate their staff in the absence of those perks, and I'm out of ideas. Any advice?

A: While bonuses and other financial incentives are nice, they are not the only things that motivate people in the workplace. In fact, one could argue that they are relatively ineffective at sufficiently motivating professionals for the long term.

Instead of guessing what motivates individual employees, managers should start out by asking them. On an individual basis, explore what is important to each contributor. What are their goals? Which tasks and responsibilities would they prefer? What could the manager do to make their jobs more fulfilling? Many of us fail to ask, either because we don't think of it or because we are afraid of going down a dangerous path: *What will we do if they ask for something we can't accommodate*?

Managers should be up front with their staff about expectations and limitations. They also should share the reasoning behind a decision. Something along the lines of, "I want to tell you early on that we do not foresee paying any bonuses this year. This is because…" Or, "I understand you want to work on our high-profile account, but I don't think that it's appropriate because…" Be sure to give the

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honest reasons behind the decision—this might involve some research and/or problem-solving on the manager's part. For example, instead of saying the company won't have any surplus, you might share that the company has decided to invest in R&D to bolster its competitive position in the market (and why that is important to the employee); or, you might identify the specific steps that must be undertaken to help an employee reach the next level in their career so they are ready to take on an important assignment.

Arguably, a manager's chief responsibility is to develop their staff and to make each contributor the best they can be. Most of us want to feel heard and respected. We want to be recognized for our individuality and the unique strengths we bring. Whenever possible, managers should consider Pareto's 80-20 rule, and focus on developing their staff's strengths instead of on closing the gap in their weaknesses. It's important that the employee be part of the process. So, together with the direct report, a manager should develop an action plan for the employee's professional development.

Encourage managers to assemble their teams and highlight each contributor's core strengths. Communicate how each person contributes to the group's success, and how the group fits in with the larger corporate mission and strategy. Caution against waiting until formal feedback/review sessions to highlight individual successes and contributions, and be sure to include the rest of the team when you do—the others in the group will have a greater appreciation of their teammate's talents, and likely will be motivated to up their game for a similar opportunity to shine in the spotlight. Profiling an individual's accomplishments in a company newsletter, intranet, or other communiqué is an especially effective means of encouragement.

Ask staff for feedback. Foster an environment that encourages direct reports to participate in the decision-making process by sharing their ideas and cite opportunities for improvement (decisions, however, still rest with the manager). Even if the manager rejects their ideas (by sharing the rationale for rejecting them), employees will feel respected by having their ideas considered and by receiving constructive feedback.

The end result is a team of creative and motivated employees. **t**