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Mixed bag

It takes a variety of incentives to keep employees motivated

By DANIEL SCHROEDER, *For Small Business Times*

Question: We've been struggling with employee motivation. I know that younger employees don't approach work the same way I did when I was starting out, but it seems that the work ethic has changed across the board. Employees don't give that extra effort. They come in late and want to leave early. Everyone seems to be asking "What's in it for me?" I know this is a toughie, but how do you go about motivating employees today?

Answer: This is a tough question, and one that does not lend itself to a simple answer. It is also one that I have been fielding more frequently. As an example, I recently was asked to give a speech to a professional group on the topic of "Who killed employee morale?" So, take solace in the fact that you are not the only manager struggling with this issue.

Stepping back for a moment, it is interesting to note that this question has been researched in earnest for at least 70 years. Beginning with the historic studies at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electric company in the 1930s, the interaction of individual and organizational variables has been investigated in the hopes of identifying the right "mix" that might lead to optimal work performance and employee motivation.

A number of frameworks have been advanced. Those include the need theories of motivation that suggest the characteristics of the individual are the primary determinants of motivation. Many readers will be familiar with Maslow's hierarchy of needs that suggests we pursue different courses of action based upon the specific needs we are seeking to fulfill.

Cognitive theories of motivation, including goal-setting theory, stress the importance of individual perceptions and reactions to orga-

nizational variables. These models suggest that employees form perceptions about the effort they will give, the relationship between their effort and various rewards, and the importance of the rewards to them.

Perhaps the most widespread model of motivation (and the most controversial) has been Skinner's reinforcement theory. This model suggests that it is the work environment (e.g., the company culture, the supervisor's style, the reward system) and who controls the work environment that affects or influences employee behavior and motivation. In essence, according to this perspective, individual differences are relatively unimportant – behavior and motivation are a function of manipulation of consequences. This is, of course, where the controversy kicks in, because this sounds rather Orwellian along the lines of "If I can control the consequences, I can shape your behavior in which way I choose." Free will seems not to enter into the equation. That's what made Skinner such a controversial figure.

We could continue reviewing approaches to motivation, but the real issue is, "What can you as a manager do to motivate your employees?" Is there one model that works most of the time? Should you combine several approaches? From where I sit, in light of the research I allude to above, the best I can offer to you is to focus on building a work environment that is stimulating and beneficial to all members. A "one size fits all" approach will not work. For example, using money as a motivator will work for some employees, and not for others. A complex workforce requires a complex system of motivation.

Some thoughts that you might helpful include the following:

- Managing motivation is not something that just happens; it takes concerted effort. It isn't something a manager does when they have the time. It is something that a manager works on every day.
- To be truly effective motivating others, managers must have a clear and accurate picture of their own strengths and weaknesses and their role in employee motivation—an accurate self-assessment fosters genuineness.
- Employees must recognize individual differences and develop a method for measuring individuals' needs, abilities, and attributes.

- Managers must forge tangible, concrete connections between employee behavior and rewards - managers must recognize strong performance and reinforce it and also recognize sub-par performance and withhold reinforcement.

- Managers should strive to design work that is challenging and stimulating, work that that helps employees to “be all they can be.”

- Managers, to the extent that they can, should help to create a work culture that fosters maximum performance. That means paying attention to the physical conditions of work as well as related human relations issues.

- Managers should strive to keep their fingers on the pulse of the employees, perhaps through more frequent use of formal measures like employee surveys. At the very least, managing by “walking about” should be a more common practice in order to observe how employees are operating.

- Finally, to be most effective in motivating employees, managers should involve them in building and deploying the motivation program. Motivation shouldn't be some-

thing done to employees, it should be something done with them. A cooperative approach is preferable to one that is top-down.

In the final analysis, to motivate your employees, you may need research your cooking skills. Specifically, you may want to take a look at the “recipes” you are using. Serving your employees the same motivational “meal” won't produce the results you seek. Today's employees “hunger” for more variety. So, look at your motivational cookbook, reflect on some of the recommendations offered here, and begin to create some new “menu options” for your employees.

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