

Employee Motivation: Theory and practice

The job of a manager in the workplace is to get things done through employees. To do this the manager should be able to motivate employees. Motivation practice and theory are difficult subjects, touching on several disciplines. In spite of a lot of basic and applied research, the subject of motivation is not clearly understood and often poorly practiced. To understand motivation one must understand human nature itself. Human nature can be very simple, yet very complex too. An understanding and appreciation of this is a prerequisite to effective employee motivation.

There is an old saying that, "You can take a horse to the water but you cannot force it to drink". People will only do either what they want to do or otherwise are motivated to do. Whether it is to excel on the workshop floor or in the 'ivory tower' of academic life, they must be motivated or driven to it, either by themselves or through external stimuli. Are people born with the self-motivation or drive? Yes and no. If no, they can be motivated, for motivation is a skill which can and must be learnt. This is essential for any business to survive and succeed.

Job performance is considered to be a function of ability and motivation. Ability in turn depends on education, experience and training and its improvement is a slow and long process. On the other hand motivation can be improved quickly. As a guideline, there are broadly seven strategies for motivation.

1. Positive reinforcement / high expectations
2. Effective discipline and punishment
3. Treating people fairly
4. Satisfying employees' needs
5. Setting work related goals
6. Restructuring jobs
7. Base rewards on job performance

"Money is important!"

Perhaps, the above saying seems obvious. But it still needs to be said, for the theory that non-material rewards have a higher priority than monetary rewards has not been proven in the real world. If this was true, then economic incentives would have lost all their force (at least in affluent countries). This we know is not correct.

According to Peter Drucker, (1974), 'There is not one shred of evidence for the alleged turning away from material rewards... Anti-materialism is a myth, no matter how much it is extolled. Economic incentives are becoming rights rather than rewards.'

There is no doubt that we live in a money-motivated world. Any amount of human relations cannot compensate for a lack of monetary reward. If the reward is right, good human relations will give that extra zest to a team, motivating them to give of their best efforts. Insufficient monetary reward cannot be compensated by good human relations. Even dedicated footballers do not think of the honour of playing for their country in international matches. They merely pay 'lip service' to it. The financial rewards of playing for their clubs far exceed any satisfaction gained from playing for their country. Even when deciding on which local football club to play for, players opt for the 'highest bidder' and are not influenced as much by sentimental feelings! It is no different in the industrial world. Strikes for better salary and rewards still do occur. All this, despite the claim of psychologists that security is the prime need of a person.

Self-motivation can go only so far and it needs to be constantly reinforced by rewards. In particular, merit must be measured and rewarded regularly, if it is to be encouraged and sustained.