

Home » About CGA-Canada » CGA Magazine » 2003 » Nov-Dec » Motivating Employees

Motivating Employees

Further than Figures

Motivating Employees

An old principle still holds true today when it comes to inspiring staff.

FROM: NOV-DEC 2003 ISSUE | BY MERGE GUPTA-SUNDERJI

In today's fast-paced world, you'd expect the biggest workplace challenge for a business professional to be the rapid advance of technology, or the need to keep abreast of the competition, or raising financial capital. Yet if you were to pose this question to a manager or supervisor, you would likely receive another answer: managing and motivating employees. While the other challenges are important, if you are having trouble inspiring the troops, all else can become secondary.

So are there any magic solutions when it comes to encouraging and motivating your staff? No magic pills, sadly, but one solution to this management conundrum has been known for years. A basic principle of human motivation that helped revolutionize the theory and practice of management was discovered quite by accident in the early 1930s. The Hawthorne Effect, as it has come to be known, refers to the rewards supervisors reap when they show employees they are concerned about them. The attention usually spurs people to better job performance.

Let's start with a little bit of history.

Between 1927 and 1932, Harvard Business School professor Elton Mayo conducted a series of experiments in Western Electric's plant in Hawthorne, Illinois. His objective was to establish the relationship between work conditions and productivity. Specifically, he was interested in finding out what effect fatigue and monotony had on job productivity, and how to control them through variables such as rest breaks, work hours, temperature and humidity. He took six women from the assembly line, separated them from the rest of the factory, and put them under the supervision of a manager who was known to be more of a friendly observer than a strict disciplinarian. Mayo then made frequent changes to their working conditions, always explaining the changes in advance. Regrettably for his experiments, the results were not what he had anticipated. But in the process, he found that when he improved the working conditions for this group of workers, their productivity went up as expected. However, when he took away their rest breaks and reinstated the previous working conditions, their productivity went up even further! Mayo had discovered a fundamental concept that seems obvious today: workplaces are social environments. When the women were singled out from the rest of the factory workers, it raised their self-esteem. When they were allowed to have a friendly relationship with their supervisor, they felt happier at work. When Mayo discussed changes in advance with them, they felt like part of the team. He had secured their co-operation and loyalty, and this was why their productivity rose even when he took away rest breaks.

How can an understanding of the Hawthorne Effect help you to better motivate and encourage your employees? Let's focus on three specific areas Mayo identified.

Raising Employees' Self-Esteem

The easiest and most influential way to raise the self-esteem of employees is to offer them genuine and sincere praise for the things they do well. Saying thank you is quite possibly the easiest option there is. But the praise must be genuine. You may think this is something that you're already good at doing, but don't move on just yet. Conduct a little self-experiment. Tomorrow, before you go to work, put pennies in one pocket. Whenever you sincerely offer praise to an employee, move one penny to another pocket. Your goal is to move all the pennies from one pocket to another before the day is over. No matter what the result, you'll learn something about yourself. If all your pennies end up in another pocket, you will affirm your belief that you're good at expressing appreciation. However, the disappointing reality is that most of you will still have pennies in your first pocket. If this happens, don't lose heart and consider the reason. Chances are you do appreciate the worth of your employees. However, like most people, just because you feel the sentiment doesn't mean that you necessarily put it into words. The solution is straightforward: you just need to say it more often. And the way to train yourself is to simply continue this self-experiment for a few weeks. Each day, you'll notice that the number of pennies moving from one pocket to another will go up. And pretty soon, as the effort becomes a habit, you'll no longer need the pennies to keep track.

Building Positive Relationships

Building positive relationships with your staff is also easier than you think. Start by learning a little bit more about your employees — the name of their spouse, the names and ages of their children, and their interests outside the workplace. Here's one easy tip to build rapport. Make a list of the birthdays and service anniversaries of each of your staff. On the appropriate day, send them a short e-mail congratulating them and, if appropriate, circulate the information to their colleagues. If it's practical, consider a bigger celebration. We're not talking about a gala party even a cupcake with a single candle makes a difference. Or try something completely spontaneous. After a particularly successful team effort, take your staff to an afternoon matinee and buy their tickets and popcorn. Be creative, and if your creativity's running low, skim through Bob Nelson's popular book *1001 Ways to Reward Employees* for some fun ideas.

Encouraging participation

A philosophy of participation can't be faked. You have to truly believe that the quality of your decisions will improve with input from the people who will be implementing them. And the benefit is dual. If you invest time in seeking the involvement of your staff in decision-making, not only will you be motivating them, but you will be getting the benefit of better quality decision-making.

But recognize that embracing a philosophy of participation takes time. Unilateral decisions can take moments to make, but seeking input from others requires that you take the time to ask questions and listen to the answers. Here's one idea. Make it a habit to always ask yourself, "Who will be the one person most impacted by my decision?" Then take the time to seek some answers from this person. You don't always have to do exactly what your staff suggests, but the very fact that you sought input will motivate them.

Since we started with a little bit of history, it is fitting to note that the place where history was made is now part of the past as well. Western Electric closed its Hawthorne plant in 1983. However, the Hawthorne Effect lives on, as an understanding of it is key to successfully motivating people.

[TOP]

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, MBA, CGA, is a keynote speaker, seminar facilitator, author, and training consultant who helps people in organizations become better communicators and leaders. Her work takes her to companies and conferences across Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. Contact her at

www.mergespeaks.com or 416 629-4453.

© 2014 CGA-Canada

- [PRIVACY POLICY](#)
- [CAREERS](#)
- [CONTACT US](#)
- [SITE MAP](#)
- [RSS](#)