

One More Time – How Do You Motivate People?

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INTRODUCTION

More than the executives of most organizations, CEOs and other top dogs in NFPs face a motivation problem.

Not their personal motivation — few groups are more highly motivated than the CEOs and senior managers of not-for-profit organizations. The advantages inherent in being king of the hill, combined with reasonable (if not generous) salary and benefit packages, plus the chance to do some genuine good and actually make the world a better place has enormous motivational impact. No, CEOs are not motivation-deprived.

The place where the motivational problem lies for NFPs and their CEOs is at the other end of the organizational food chain; with those whose jobs are at the bottom of the heap.

What's a not-for-profit organization to do when all of its honest and genuine efforts to motivate Sally and Sam to come to work on time, to deliver efficient client services, and to act as if they were happy to be a part of the team, fail? There is no shortage of pop-psych books and motivational speakers who'll tell you a thousand-and-one ways to light a fire in Sam's belly. But what do you do when the fire goes out and none of those thousand-and-one ways seem to work any more?

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT MOTIVATION?

Given the constant barrage of pep talks and posters, slogans, free advice and exhortation on the topic of motivation, there should certainly at least be a couple of core principles that predictably work every time. "Aren't there? Or are we stuck with the notion that everybody's an individual, and what's a turn-on for Sally is likely to be a turn-off for Sam?"

Rather than speculate, let's gather some empirical data. Think back through all the jobs you've ever had, and bring to mind the job you had that produced the greatest amount of motivation in you. It doesn't matter what the job was — it might be the job you have right now; it might be a part-time job you had in high school. It makes no difference.

It also makes no difference what the word, "motivation," means to you. However you choose to define the term is fine. Simply bring to mind the job that you had when, whatever the word *motivation* means to you, you had the greatest degree of job satisfaction, excitement, enthusiasm, turned-on-ness.

Now that you've got the job clearly in mind, quickly jot down the factors that caused you to feel so motivated, so satisfied, so turned on. If you're like most normal people, the factors you'll list are highly predictable — as are the ones that won't make your list. On your list will appear such items as opportunities for achievement, recognition for that achievement, freedom and autonomy, challenge, the chance to learn and grow, and the work itself. What will be missing? You won't write down such important items as job security, benefits, working conditions, the quality of supervision, and the organization's policies and procedures.

WHAT'S HAPPENING HERE?

It turns out that the missing link in understanding motivation is the realization that there are two different factors at work. On one hand there are the things that motivate us, that turn us on, that generate satisfaction. On the other are those things that dissatisfy us, turn us off, demotivate us. Psychologist Fred Herzberg stated it best: Job satisfaction and job dissatisfaction are *not* flip sides of the same coin. They are entirely different coins, and the wise NFP CEO uses that insight to his or her advantage.

In short: The absence of job satisfaction is not dissatisfaction; it's simply *no job satisfaction*. Now this is not semantic sleight-of-hand. If you eliminate all of the dissatisfiers from a job, you don't produce a worker who's happy and turned on. All you generate is somebody who says, "Gee, I guess I don't have much to bitch about " — hardly the sound of a motivated worker. There are two separate variables at work, and you have to attack both of them.

A good working definition of *motivation* is this: motivation represents a measurable increase in both job satisfaction and productivity. The motivated worker does his job better and likes it more than those folks who are not so motivated. What truly *motivates* people is the first set of factors mentioned: opportunities for achievement and accomplishment, recognition, learning and growth, discretion, and worthwhile work. Those are the items that generate strong feelings of loyalty, satisfaction, enthusiasm, and all those other things we want to see in those whose paychecks we sign.

But you can't get away with working exclusively on the satisfiers scale. You have to make sure that you clean up the job to reduce or eliminate those things that cause people to be unhappy and quit.

Wait a minute, some of you are saying — where does money fit into this scheme? Pay is the ringer in the equation; the one factor that shows up as both a source of satisfaction and a source of dissatisfaction. People are dissatisfied with their pay when they feel it isn't commensurate with their efforts, or is distributed inequitably, or doesn't reflect the responsibilities of the job, or is out of touch with market realities. If you don't pay competitive wages, people will be unhappy and they will quit. But no matter how much you raise salaries, you won't generate motivation and job satisfaction, because job satisfaction is a function of the content of the job.

Look at it this way: Hire me to wash dirty dishes and pay me chickenfeed and I'll be unhappy and demotivated. But raise my wages to a princely sum and guess what — I'll still hate washing dirty dishes. But I won't complain any more about my crummy compensation; I probably won't quit; and I may even improve my attendance record (if you pay me my Gatesian wages on an hourly basis). What you have bought with the munificent pay increase you provided me was not the *presence of satisfaction*. All you have bought is the *absence of dissatisfaction*. If you really want me to be a happy camper, you'd better change the nature of my work.

And changing the nature of the work is the true key to motivation. The message is clear: do everything you can to mollify the generators of employee unhappiness, recognizing that no matter how big an investment you make you'll get precious little in return. All your money will buy is the absence of dissatisfaction. Listen up — you have *no choice*! You must pay people competitive wages, you must provide a healthy, safe and attractive work environment, you must give at least as good insurance policies and vacations and retirements plans and other bennies as they could get working for the bagel joint down the street. If you don't, people will quit and you won't be able to hire replacements. But all you'll get for the fortune you spend in this effort is a bunch of people who have to search hard for something to complain about.

If you want genuine motivation, you've got to look at the job itself. Does the work provide people with the chance to really accomplish something? I'm not talking about the psychological trap of providing "a sense of accomplishment." I don't want a *sense* of anything, and neither does anybody who's working for your NFP. What we want is the opportunity for real achievement, for genuine accomplishment. Does my job allow me to do something that makes an actual difference? Do I get recognized for what I do? Do I have a lot of say in how I do my job or am I totally constricted by standard operating procedures? Can I learn and grow and develop on this job, or will I be tightening the same nut on the same bolt for the next thirty years?

The Peace Corps knows the secret. The Peace Corps generates incredible feelings of motivation among its volunteers because it provides them with jobs worth doing. The PC sticks middle-class Americans in malarial jungles and feeds them grubs and bugs. Why don't their volunteers flee? Because while they're there they have the chance to transform the lives of entire communities and populations. CARE is another sterling example. And many other NFPs have overcome their inability to pay Silicon Valley wage rates by giving people the best jobs they might dream of. The message is clear: if you can't satisfy their pocketbooks, then satisfy their souls. And most NFPs have the capability of providing soul-satisfying work.

The motivation problem that most NFPs face is that since they can't compete with megabucks corporations, they tell themselves that trying is useless, abandon all efforts to motivate and merely hope that staff will somehow develop internal generators of motivation independent of any efforts they make from the top.

SKINNER SAID IT BEST

What do we know for sure about human behavior. The truth is, precious little. But it turns out that there is one thing that we do know for sure, one thing that is highly predictive of human behavior. It is the principle that psychologist B. F. Skinner promulgated in 1936: "Behavior is a function of its consequences." Never has truth been captured more succinctly.

What Skinner said was this: To a large extent, what people choose to do, or no do, depends on what happens to them as a result. If a person does something and the consequence is positive / rewarding / pleasant, the person will keep on doing that thing. Simple enough. And if a person does something and discovers that the consequences are negative, punishing, distasteful, she will stop doing that thing. And if a person does something and finds out that there are no consequences B nothing at all happens — he may keep it up for a short time but eventually, to use Skinner's fancy phrase, the behavior will be extinguished.

While making wholesale changes in jobs to increase staff motivation is an important long-term effort, the decision to immediately start providing recognition of good performance any time it's encountered can get the motivational engine working. Sally and Sam may need more than just an attaboy, but acknowledging excellent work every time it appears is a wonderful place to start.

ABOUT DICK GROTE

Dick Grote is Chairman and CEO of Grote Consulting Corporation in Dallas, Texas, and the developer of the GroteApproachSM web-based performance management system. He's the author of *The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal*, *The Performance Appraisal Question and Answer Book* and *Discipline Without Punishment*. Dick's next book, *Forced Ranking: Making Performance Management Work*, will be published in 2005 by the Harvard Business School Press.

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GroteApproach, Ltd., is dedicated to delivering the technology, services and client care that transform organizations from best-effort climates into results-driven cultures. The GroteApproach web-based performance management system is the culmination of Dick Grote's mission to transform the way organizations manage and develop their most valuable resource - their people. It reflects best practices in strategy-based performance management as identified in Dick's 25 years of research and consulting with hundreds of sophisticated organizations throughout the world. Its combination of unrivaled expertise and superior technology make the GroteApproach system an ideal fit for organizations large and small.

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