

MOTIVATING PEOPLE IS NOT ABOUT CARROT AND STICKS



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Leaders often rely on the carrot vs. the stick approach to motivate employees, where the carrot is a reward for compliance and the stick is a consequence for non-compliance. But this is an outdated approach that never really works well. Motivation is less about employees *doing great work* and more about employees *feeling great about their work*. There is no stronger motivation for employees than an understanding that their work matters, and is relevant to someone or something other than a financial statement.

To motivate your employees, start by sharing context about the work you're asking them to do. Recognize that challenges can materially impact motivation. Be proactive in identifying and addressing them. What might make an employee's work difficult or cumbersome? What can you do to ease the burden? And remember that if you're not engaged and enthusiastic about the work you do, it's unlikely that your team will be. So, check in with yourself about how motivated you are for the job at hand, because employees feel more motivated when their leaders are also motivated.

VINCENT TSUI FOR HBR

Motivating employees seems like it should be easy. And it is — in theory. But while the concept of motivation may be straightforward, motivating employees in real-life situations is far more challenging. As leaders, we're asked to understand what motivates each individual on our team and manage them accordingly. What a challenging ask of leaders, particularly those with large or dispersed teams and those who are already overwhelmed by their own workloads.

Leaders are also encouraged to rely on the carrot versus stick approach for motivation, where the carrot is a reward for compliance and the stick is a consequence for noncompliance. But when our sole task as leaders becomes compliance, trying to compel others to do something, chances are we're the only ones who will be motivated.

Why not consider another way to motivate employees? I'd like to suggest a new dialogue that embraces the key concept that motivation is less about employees *doing great work* and more about employees *feeling great about their work*. The better employees feel about their work, the more motivated they remain over time. When we step away from the traditional carrot or stick to motivate employees, we can engage in a new and meaningful dialogue about the work instead. Here's how:

Share context and provide relevance. There is no stronger motivation for employees than an understanding that their work matters and is relevant to someone or something other than a financial statement. To motivate your employees, start by sharing context about the work you're asking them to do. What are we doing as an organization and as a team? Why are we doing it? Who benefits from our work and how? What does success look like for our team and for each employee? What role does each employee play in delivering on that promise? Employees are motivated when their work has relevance.

Anticipate roadblocks to enable progress. When you ask anything significant of team members, they will undoubtedly encounter roadblocks and challenges along the path to success. Recognize that challenges can materially impact motivation. Be proactive in identifying and addressing them. What might make an employee's work difficult or cumbersome? What can you do to ease the burden? What roadblocks might surface? How can you knock them down? How can you remain engaged just enough to see trouble coming and pave the way for success? Employees are motivated when they can make progress without unnecessary interruption and undue burdens.

Recognize contributions and show appreciation. As tempting as it is to try to influence employee satisfaction with the use of carrots and sticks, it isn't necessary for sustained motivation. Far more powerful is your commitment to recognizing and acknowledging contributions so that employees feel appreciated and valued. Leaders consistently underestimate the power of acknowledgment to bring forth employees' best efforts. What milestones have been achieved? What unexpected or exceptional results have been realized? Who has gone beyond the call of duty to help a colleague or meet a deadline? Who has provided great service or support to a customer in crisis? Who "walked the talk" on your values in a way that sets an example for others and warrants recognition? Employees are motivated when they feel appreciated and recognized for their contributions.

Check in to assess your own motivation. What if you've done all of the above but are still struggling to motivate others? You may need to assess your own motivation. Employees are very attuned to whether leaders have a genuine connection to the work. If you're not engaged and enthusiastic about your company, your team, or the work you do, it's unlikely that you'll be a great motivator of others. What aspects of your role do you enjoy? What makes you proud to lead your team? What impact can you and your team have on others both inside and outside the organization? How can you adapt your role to increase your energy and enthusiasm? Employees feel motivated when their leaders are motivated.

The bottom line is: Don't rely on outdated methods and tricks to motivate employees. Talk with your team about the relevance of the work they do every day. Be proactive in identifying and solving problems for your employees. Recognize employee contributions in specific, meaningful ways on a regular basis. Connect with your own motivation, and share it freely with your team. Put away the carrots and sticks and have meaningful conversations instead. You'll be well on your way to leading a highly motivated team.
