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Motivation and the Effective Manager

By Stephanie Weist



Stephanie Weist, FSA, MAAA, is associate vice president at Nationwide Financial in Columbus, Ohio. She can be reached at weist@nationwide.com.

This past June, I had the opportunity to be part of a webcast, “How to be an Effective Manager,” co-sponsored by the Actuary of the Future and Management and Personal Development Sections. One topic I discussed was how critical motivating and engaging your team is to being an effective manager.

When I first became a manager, I focused on output and work product. Can we deliver more reports, faster and faster? I didn’t give a lot of thought to the people doing the work. Over the years, I have come to realize it is how people are treated and how much they enjoy being on the team that will lead to more and better work. Here are some of the ideas around motivation that I shared in that webcast.

WHOSE JOB IS IT?

Whose job it is to motivate you? I have always leaned toward the philosophy that the manager’s job is to hire motivated associates and then create an atmosphere that keeps the associates motivated. So how do you create this atmosphere? You have to find out what your team members want from work, and you will quickly find out that one size doesn’t fit all.

Some motivators are task accomplishment/problem solving, recognition, influence and health/life balance.

One way to figure out those most important to your team members is to use a motivator checklist - I have used one from the website www.managementhelp.org. I give the motivator checklist to all of my associates and have them rank what motivates them. It not only helps me but it also helps them realize what their motivators are. You’ll get a different answer from each person. This will help you know what to do for each person and maybe more importantly what not to do! For example, if someone ranks teaching or guiding others low, you probably don’t want to put that person in charge of training for new associates. Once you know someone’s motivators, you can personalize projects or the way you present projects to keep your team members motivated.

Another way to get what you need to create a motivational atmosphere is to have informal one-on-one meetings and conversations. **Simply ASK!** These meetings are also a great place to ask specific engagement questions every year to find out which is the most important that individual. You’ll never know what John wants unless you ask him and give him an honest opportunity to express what he needs.

Sometimes you won’t be able to provide what people are asking for. But you need to be available to listen. These one-on-one meetings are also a good time to get to know your associates, their families, their favorite foods and their pet’s names! We’re all busy, so set aside dedicated time to meet with each of them individually on a regular basis. It may seem like it is contrived and insincere, but if you truly listen and take the time to care about the associates on your team, it will be received in the nature it was intended.

RECOGNITION

Over the years, I have found that one of the biggest motivators is recognition. Recognition really needs to be timely and specific. People want to know after they have done something what you think about it.

My current responsibilities are financial reporting. So every three months my team is in an intense, deadline driven quarterly close. At the end of each close, I take the time to write a thank you or appreciation note to everyone on my team. I make sure to mention specific actions that I appreciated about each person during the close. I don’t want to give out generic thanks for the work done because that doesn’t seem sincere and it doesn’t motivate as well as specific, timely recognition.

Recognition doesn’t have to come only from you, the manager! Encourage your associates to praise and recognize their peers and co-workers. I spoke of the appreciation notes I write each quarter. I have handed out similar blank appreciation forms to everyone on the team and encouraged them to let others know when they appreciate what they have done. It is great to know that your co-workers and customers recognize your efforts.



Another great motivator is to celebrate achievements. This is an important step that is often forgotten, especially in actuarial circles. Without ongoing acknowledgement of success, your associates can become frustrated and even cynical about their efforts. Why work hard if no one seems to care what you accomplish?

Things we try to celebrate on my team are passing exams. Since I manage a diverse group, it is not just SOA exams, but also LOMA, CPA, MBA and whatever else people are doing for continuing education. We also celebrate birthdays and anniversaries with the company.

In the past, once we finished a project we just moved on to the next task on the list, but now we celebrate the end of large projects. Over the last few years we have had large model conversion projects for our forecasting models. At the end of each major conversion, we had a celebratory lunch to recognize everyone who worked on the project. A lunch didn't cost a lot, but it showed people we appreciated and recognized their efforts.

Some people love awards, so why not make up your own award? One day at the Dollar store I spotted a small orange rubber traffic cone with the words **Way To Go** on the side. It is about 4 inches tall. Now when someone goes out of their way or above and beyond on a project, they are awarded the **Way To Go** cone. It sits proudly on their desk until someone else earns it. It isn't given out in a set number of days, like associate of the month, but when it is earned for exceptional work.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

Motivation works best when you set clear expectations. People need to know what you expect of them. You should align goals of the associates with the goals of the organization. The top down approach works well here. Start with the goals of the company and then drill down to the department and then the individual associate level.

I always set the current year objectives and then discuss them with the individual. I like to get buy-in from my associates instead of unilaterally setting objectives. It doesn't mean it is a total democracy, but people need to know that their opinions and ideas matter and are taken into account whenever possible. When priorities change, as we know they do all the time, make sure you clearly explain what is changing and why. Attempt to limit the unexpected surprises for those on your team.

FEEDBACK

Feedback, like recognition, needs to be timely and specific in nature. Provide both positive and constructive feedback where necessary. If you have someone underachieving, don't let it get too far before you communicate what you expect and learn why your expectations are not being met. Go in with an open mind to see if there are any issues that might be affecting the performance such as workload, stress or outside distractions.

You set the objectives so that they aligned with the company goals, so your feedback should show how the associate helped achieved company results. Think about providing feedback from others in addition to your own. We have a mechanism at my company where you can choose peers, co-workers and customers to provide anonymous feedback, so it is easy. If you don't have that, find another way to try to capture that feedback. Hearing their customers' comments will let the associate know his or her effort is appreciated.

Those are just a few ideas on motivation and engagement that have worked for me. I hope you will be able to use one or two on your team. ●

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