

MOTIVATING PEOPLE IN LEAN TIMES

Professor Francis Flynn

IN BRIEF

While extrinsic rewards (such as pay, bonuses, promotions) cannot be substituted by intrinsic rewards (such as a sense of fulfilment), the potential to motivate people through intrinsic rewards tends to be under-valued. Ironically, even as individuals say that they would be highly motivated by intrinsic rewards, they tend to underestimate how important intrinsic rewards are for others. When incentives or disincentives are introduced, the desired behaviours they are intended to motivate should always be made clear.

WHAT MOST MOTIVATES EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE?

- **Autonomy** — Being independent, being trusted to exercise discretion, acting out of our own volition
- **Competence** — being good at what we do – gaining and demonstrating mastery at work
- **Relatedness and group identity** — Feeling part of a bigger group and not marginalised
- **Self-esteem** from a sense of doing something worthwhile, which makes a purposeful difference
- **Direct Supervisors** have the greatest influence over employee motivation: not peers, subordinates, or top leaders.

REWARDING EFFECTIVELY: WHY IT MATTERS

Negative reinforcement is not the same as positive reinforcement.

Decreasing undesired behaviour (by threatening, for example) does not necessarily increase desired behaviour. The key to positive reinforcement is transparency: clarity about what is expected and what is rewarded.

Spot rewards spotlight desired behaviour

The shorter the time between a desired behaviour and a reward, the clearer the message about what the reward wants to encourage. If people are not clear as to what a reward is for, positive behaviour cannot be expected in the future. Employees may also prefer items in kind instead of minor cash quantum.

Beware loss aversion

The feeling of loss when a reward is removed may be greater than the satisfaction gained when the reward was first introduced. So there should be long term commitment to rewards once they have been introduced.

Reframe goals to motivate seemingly repetitive tasks

How did top basketball player Michael Jordan motivate his team to win the championship three years in a row? In the first year, the goal was to prove they could do it. In the second, it was to demonstrate that the first win was not a fluke. And in the third, it was to set a record and make history.

Communicate, communicate, communicate

Most managers are guilty of under-communicating rather than over-communicating. They could also be subject to Transparency Biases — assuming that something is obvious when it isn't, or that employees can discern their implied intentions. The danger is that when people are faced with ambiguity, they don't tend to give the benefit of the doubt — instead, they form their own conclusions (which may well be wrong).

Therefore, when presenting or withdrawing a reward, it is important to explain why — it cannot be assumed that the reasons are clear. Similarly, when addressing underperformance, there should be an opportunity for employees to explain themselves.

QUESTIONS FOR THE PUBLIC SERVICE TO REFLECT ON

1. Why are we in the public service?
2. Where do we derive fulfilment in our work?
 - How can we make that positive difference in the lives of others?
 - What are the levers we have in the public service to make a positive impact?
 - Why do we want to make that difference?
3. Do we treat others the way we ourselves want to be treated?
 - Do we treat our colleagues with the respect and appreciation we so desire for ourselves?
 - Do we recognise and reward good work in a timely and authentic manner?
4. How do we reframe our goals to be nimble and passionate in our pursuits to better the lives of others?

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