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Stop Trying to Motivate... and Do This Instead.

A WHITE PAPER
IN THE CEO THOUGHT-PROVOKER™ SERIES.

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Clear Thinking Is the Highest Paid Work™.

Executive Summary

Stop trying to **motivate** your employees

– because ***you can't***. What you **can** do is

create the conditions under which

they will motivate themselves.

Managers are often frustrated by unmotivated employees. They find themselves asking ineffectual questions such as “How can I motivate Joe?” Such questions lead managers to look in the wrong places for solutions.

In this white paper, we look at the nine most common causes of poor performance and why ‘motivation’ is not one of them.

Managers will learn a simple method for quickly diagnosing what might be causing poor performance. Once the causes become clear, so do the solutions.



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“He’s just not motivated. He comes late, misses his deadlines and says that he doesn’t like the project he has been assigned. He says it is boring and wants a different one. But the company needs his programming talent on *this* project! How do I *motivate* him to do what needs to get done?!”

Motivation, my clients and seminar participants tell me, is a big problem. Yet asking questions like “How do we motivate him?” only makes things worse.

If we were speaking about a machine we might ask “How do I fix it so it stops that screeching and quits leaking oil all over the floor?” If it were a buggy program, we might ask “Where is the faulty code so we can cut it out and supplant it with the poetry equivalent?” When dealing with *things*, it is sensible to look for what is damaged, missing or loose so we can grab our tool belt and fix it. But people are far more complex.

Asking “How do I motivate him?” is really saying “How do I *fix him* so he stops complaining and gets excited about this important project?” Something in this employee’s head clearly isn’t aligned and, like a machine, I want to fix it so I can get on with my life.

This approach never works. You might get temporary *compliance*, but you won’t get long term *commitment*. And isn’t *commitment* what you really want?

What You Really Want From Your People. (And it isn’t motivation or high morale.)

Motivation is a catch phrase we use to describe a range of behaviors. For example, Tom’s people come late and leave early. Tom concludes that morale is low and his people aren’t motivated. Joe’s people come on time and leave on time. Joe concludes that morale is low because they don’t COME EARLY and STAY LATE. Different people in different situations will look at different behaviors and conclude that “Morale is low” or “She isn’t motivated.”

Like all other abused business terms, “motivation” means many things to many people. Yet we need to be very clear about the results we want. Unlike a tuna sandwich, a piano or a cold beer, motivation is not specific enough a thing. We want *specific behaviors* that will produce the business results we need.

Three Steps that Result In Motivated Employees

STEP 1: Articulate clearly and specifically the business results and attendant behaviors you want to see from your employees.

A client was having issues with employee lateness. So whenever an employee would arrive late – even just ten minutes late – he would give them a look and point to his watch. This created additional problems as he began to notice that his employees were still late but now they were ALSO resentful.

“I want my employees to come at 9am and not later,” he told me.

“Why?” I asked.

“Because that is when we open. The phones need to be answered and the work needs to get done. We can’t have the secretary telling callers that Mike isn’t in and, ‘No. I’m sorry. I don’t know when he will be here.’”

The results he wanted were phones answered with speed and courtesy and clients who felt they were getting quick and full attention.

STEP 2: If the behaviors and results we see are not the ones we want, we need to find the cause -- or causes.

It is easy to *blame* people. It is easy to conclude that “Joe isn’t motivated,” “Susan doesn’t care,” “Bill has an attitude problem” and “Finance has ulterior motives.” But such an approach won’t help us get the specific behaviors and business results that we want.

The Nine Primary Causes of Poor Performance

There are nine primary factors¹ that cause the kind of behavior we don’t want. This holds true whether we speak of programmers, street sweepers or CEOs and they can be organized into four categories:

¹ Based on the work of Robert Mager, specifically “Analyzing Performance Problems.”

1. Expectations	2. Skills	3. Processes	4. Backwards Consequences
<p>1. <u>Unclear expectations</u></p> <p>→ Clarify expectations.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ <i>Are there hidden expectations?</i> ▪ <i>Do the performers know what a good job looks like?</i> ▪ <i>How can we make expectations even clearer?</i> 	<p><i>Have they performed as expected it in the past?</i></p> <p>2. <u>Lack of skills</u></p> <p>→ Arrange training.</p> <p>Can't be trained? >> Reassign or let go.</p> <p>3. <u>Rarely uses skills</u></p> <p>→ Arrange practice.</p> <p>4. <u>Uses skills, but no feedback</u></p> <p>→ Provide feedback.</p>	<p>5. <u>Job is too complicated.</u></p> <p>→ Simplify job. → Eliminate conflicting demands.</p> <p>6. <u>Are the resources and tools adequate?</u></p> <p>→ Arrange for adequate resources and tools.</p>	<p>7. <u>Undesired performance is rewarding.</u></p> <p>→ Remove reward.</p> <p>8. <u>Desired performance is punishing.</u></p> <p>→ Remove punishment.</p> <p>9. <u>Performance leads to no consequences at all.</u></p> <p>→ Arrange consequences.</p>

1. Unclear expectations.

In my experience, this may be the most common cause of poor performance. It is astounding how often the boss thinks she has been crystal clear, but the employees don't really understand what she wants.

This is always the first place to look when actual performance falls short of what you want.

2. Skills.

If a problem is skills related, it is usually easy to correct.

If the employee lacks the skills and it makes sense to train them, provide training. If, however, they have the skills and may have even done the job successfully in the past, they may simply be lacking feedback and are quite unaware of their poor performance. Alternatively, if this is a skill they are only asked to use occasionally, they may just need more practice. Provide the opportunity to practice.



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3. Processes:

I will never forget the teenager I helped find a job at a retail store to keep him off the streets. The store had received a box of digital watches, all with dead batteries. The store manager asked him to open all the watches and replace the batteries. "I could have done a very good job very quickly," he later complained "if they had just given me the right tools. Instead I had to use my house key and it took all afternoon."

Often the job is unnecessarily complicated or the people lack resources to get it done to the standard we'd like. This would also include asking a salesperson to sell an inferior or overpriced product in a competitive market.

4. Backwards consequences:

Sometimes we reward precisely what we *don't* want. Other times poor performance is countered with grumbling from management, but no significant consequences to the poor performer.

I saw this recently with a client who complained that one of his managers was supposed to provide a certain kind of report each month – but he was a year and a half behind! "Well, what happens if this report is not generated?" I asked.

"I don't have accurate figures so I can't make educated decisions," he said.

"No," I said. "I mean what happens *to the manager* if he doesn't turn in the reports on time?"

"Nothing. I complain and yell at him but he knows that nothing will come of it..."

If the consequences don't support the behaviors you want, you have not created the conditions for your employees to thrive.

The stereotypical scenario of punishing good performance is giving more and more work to the most effective employee. We end up punishing our best people for their high performance while everyone else goofs off. We start meetings late – rewarding the latecomers and punishing those who came on time.

This dynamic manifests itself in other, more subtle ways as well. Sometimes it is societal or peer pressure at work, providing strong reward for the kind of behavior you don't want. Your employees will resist until the balance is changed.



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This was the problem in the case of the 'unmotivated programmer' with which we began. A programmer who finds his assigned project to be boring perceives the very work you want him doing to be unpleasant – or even punishing. In other words, the consequence of doing what we want is a punishment: boredom, which may cause sub-standard performance. And when we see his poor performance and hear him complaining about the project we will say he isn't motivated.

Each of these four categories could lead to a situation where we might conclude that our employees are not motivated. And in each situation the solution is not a pep talk or a motivational speaker. *The answer is to fix the cause – not the person.*

STEP 3: Fix the cause and the person will surprise you.

Many clients experience a sense of great relief when they realize that poor performance, low morale and lack of motivation have clear, specific causes. It is a big relief to realize that you don't need to be a wizard who 'fixes' people but merely a leader who creates conditions in which those same people will thrive.

I don't mean to make it sound easy. Providing skills training and appropriate resources tend to be the easier areas. It gets trickier when the issue is setting clear expectations, providing meaningful feedback and establishing appropriate consequences and rewards. Each situation, and often each employee, must be approached as its very own special case. There is no one-size-fits-all when it comes to effective leadership – or motivation.

The guiding principle is always this: A leader's job is to create conditions under which his people can thrive. Look for the true *causes* of the undesired behavior so you can correct them and create the right conditions. If people are not as excited as we think they should be, there's probably a rational reason for it.

What Would You Do In the 'Bored Programmer' Situation?

What is the solution for the bored programmer?

First, remember the rule. We can't fix him. Nor do we want to. Our job is to create the conditions under which he can thrive. That's it.



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You might strike a deal with the programmer. "If you finish the project by this date at this quality level, you will have first choice of what project you want to do next." You are not removing the drudgery of the boring job, but you are adding a pleasing element to the picture; light at the end of the tunnel. If he perceives this reward to be weighty enough, he will now behave the way you want and voila! – by addressing the real cause, a punishing consequence – he becomes motivated!

Alternatively, you might come up with ways to actually reduce the drudgery. Perhaps you can assign this person an assistant. Or even find someone who is more appropriate for the project. (To assume that 'no one likes these kinds of projects' – as a seminar participant once insisted – is a baseless assumption that reflects more on the manager than anyone else. People of all types and taste are out there. If this kind of problem crops up often, stop looking for the magic potion to pour into their coffee and go find a few of the right kind of people!)

THE CEO THOUGHT-PROVOKER BOTTOM LINE:

1. If someone is not doing what you want them to do, there is a CAUSE – or several causes. The EFFECT is the behavior you see, don't like, and ascribe to poor motivation. To change the EFFECT you must identify the cause and correct it.
2. **There are no shortcuts.** As leader, you MUST put your own interests and frustrations aside long enough to really LISTEN and UNDERSTAND the other's point of view. Only then will you begin to think of creative ideas for how to create conditions that lead to inspired performance.
3. As leaders and managers, our job is not to fix people or to motivate them. It is to create conditions under which they can thrive.

Dov Gordon, a sought after management and strategy consultant, helps companies make better, wiser decisions and then quickly get things done. He is author of "If You Are 'Implementing' Your Strategy – You Don't Have One," a downloadable audio book available at www.Superior-Strategy.com. The first 25 minutes, a full third of the program, is free for all.

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