How to Motivate Employees: What Research Is Telling Us
by Scott Lazenby

In his classic *Harvard Business Review* article, "One More Time, How Do You Motivate Employees," author Frederick Herzberg (1968) asserted that the way to motivate employees was to enrich their jobs. He wrote that they would perform better and do more if they were challenged intellectually, and they would get more psychological satisfaction from their work. But many managers have found that not all employees *want* to have their jobs enriched; many would prefer to do fairly routine and repetitive tasks, and intellectual challenges cause them stress. I have to admit that on some days, when problems are coming at me from every direction, my own job could use a little less enrichment. If I had a choice, for that little while I would escape from the office and mow the grass in the city's parks.

Experienced managers have found that a one-size-fits-all approach to employee motivation doesn't work. Challenges that motivate one person might actually discourage another. Some individuals seem to have a high need for praise and recognition, even when their work is mediocre; others don't seem to care about those things. Job enrichment *does* work for some people, in some situations. But how do we know when it will work, and what works for the other people and the other situations?

Encouraging Results: People *Are* Different
Fortunately for us, during the past 35 years psychologists have conducted hundreds of research studies as they have attempted to answer these motivation questions. They have tested theories both in experimental settings and in the field—in real work settings. Not surprisingly, one result of the research is the conclusion that individuals *are* different.

We are all familiar with the Myers-Briggs personality profiles and dozens of offshoots. In these, there are typically several dimensions to personality differences. In the area of work motivation, however, the thing that really seems to matter is the "goal orientation" of individuals (Elliot and Church 1997).

Although this is an oversimplification, people generally fall into one of two categories of goal orientation. In the first category are individuals who have a mastery orientation or a learning orientation. They welcome challenges and enjoy learning new skills that allow them to master the challenges. Their approach to problems is associated with a belief that intelligence and ability are not fixed quantities but are in fact variables that the individual can influence (Dweck and Leggett 1988). For these people, Herzberg's job enrichment theory actually works, most of the time.

In the second category are individuals who have a performance orientation. They measure their worth in terms of how they perform in relation to goals, and they are easily discouraged if they believe the goal is too difficult. They seek out situations where they can excel, and they avoid situations where they aren't assured of success. They tend to see intelligence and ability as fixed quantities, over which they have no control ("I can't do this." "I'm not smart enough." "I'm no good at computers."). They would see job enrichment as threatening: a way for management to set them up for failure.

People *are* different, and we need to master the skills needed to motivate different people. For this, a crucial result of research comes to our rescue. It turns out that in many situations, the way goals are set for (or by) people is a stronger influence on performance than individual differences in orientation toward goals. Edwin Locke and Gary Latham (2002) found that "specific, difficult goals consistently led to higher performance than urging people to do their best."

This does have a familiar ring. TQM and other industrially based management approaches emphasize that goals must be specific (and measurable). It is consistent with the current interest in performance measurement in which we set goals in areas like building permit turnaround time, police response time, quality of customer service, and circulation of library materials.

Nothing new here. But the story gets more complicated and more interesting. In some situations, for some people, an exhortation to "do your best" actually seemed to produce higher performance (Kanfer and Ackerman, 1989). This finding holds primarily for mastery-oriented individuals who are approaching a complex task.

Gerard Seijts and colleagues discovered, based on experiments, that a challenging *mastery* (or learning) goal actually resulted in even higher performance for both mastery- and performance-oriented individuals (Seijts et al. 2004). Seijts draws an analogy to a novice golfer: performance is better if the golfer first concentrates on mastering grip, stance, and swing before aiming for a low overall score.

Implications

What are the implications of this for city and county management? First, there is an obvious application for newly hired employees. Even in jobs that involve fairly routine and repetitive tasks, performance will be higher if the employee is first given specific goals to learn and procedures and tools to master. Performance goals can be set later, as the employee gains confidence.

Second, many of the challenges we and our staffs face are complex. Take, for example, the conversion of financial software to a new system. We would have a better chance for success if, instead of setting a goal of a smooth transition, we set a goal of identifying a *set of strategies* that would improve the chances of a smooth transition.

This distinction may appear to be subtle, but it is critical. You can bet that some of the individuals responsible for a software conversion are performance-oriented people. Setting up the project with a series of milestones as goals might immediately discourage those employees, and it could actually reduce the chance of success.

Think about specific mastery goals in these kinds of areas: finding a way out of a messy legal entanglement, improving subdivision review time and the quality of development, improving the image of the police department in the community, stimulating development in a languishing business park, improving relations with a labor union, pacifying a militant citizen group.

Our "I can manage anything" philosophy might hinder more than help us in these areas. Our natural inclination is to tackle the problems head on, to *solve* them. We might be better served by setting a mastery goal: What would it take to make us the city or county that is best at dealing with this kind of problem?"

Who Sets the Goals?

Supervisors should not be bashful about setting goals for their employees: they need to do it, and it makes a significant difference in the performance of the organization. That said, employees need to buy in to the goals (Locke and Latham 2002). This is best done by explaining the practical result of the goal being set and the reason why it is important.

We local government managers might have an easier time than our corporate counterparts here, because public service is an overall goal that is relatively easy to share. Remarkably, the research does *not* indicate that the participation of the employee in setting the goal leads, in itself, to greater commitment to the goal: "from a motivational perspective, an assigned goal is as effective as one that is set participatively *provided that* the purpose or rationale for the goal is given" (Locke and Latham 2002, 708, emphasis added).

There is a benefit of employee participation in goal setting, but that is apparently due to the information sharing that happens when goals are discussed and not because the employee gains greater ownership of the goals (Locke, Alavi, and Wagner 1997).

When the Task Isn't Complex

Many of the functions of city and county governments involve fairly routine and repetitive tasks. Even local government managers must assemble the council agenda packet on time, review financial reports, and attend chamber of commerce meetings—tasks that are certainly not complex.

Once again, a specific and challenging goal leads to the highest performance. A do-your-best goal is not as effective for either mastery-oriented or performance-oriented individuals. But in the case of basic tasks, the goal should be the more familiar performance goal and not a learning or mastery goal; for example, "reduce the uncollected court fines by 10 percent within 3 months," "maintain Internet service at 99.999 percent up time," "collect garbage from 1,200 homes per day," "patch the potholes on Main Street by 11:00 a.m."

When to Set Goals

Local governments aren't factories, and rarely do we see an employee performing the same task, day in and day out. In practice, even in the most routine job, the worker is constantly switching from task to task (DeShon and Gillespie 2005). So we know by now that simply assigning tasks to employees while urging them to do their best isn't especially helpful.

But neither, in most cases, is an annual goal. The public works crew leader should, instead, be setting specific goals daily. Television has given us the image of the morning briefing in the police squad room, but how many of our police officers really begin each shift with a specific, challenging set of goals for that day?

Neither we nor our staff members want to be micromanaged, and this is where the skill and perception of the supervisor are critical. Mastery-oriented individuals are comfortable with an outcome-based goal, in which they are free to pick the path to attaining the goal.

The same holds true for performance-oriented individuals, *as long as* the goal is attainable and the individual has the necessary tools and knowledge. The person's orientation to goals seems to be a fairly fixed personality trait, but managers can increase the "self-efficacy" of their employees. They can do it through training, role modeling, and expressing confidence in the employee's ability to attain the goal (Bandura 1997).

Feedback

We all need quick and direct feedback on our progress toward goals; we can't reach them by flying blind. In most areas of local government, I don't believe this is as great a challenge as the performance measurement consultants would have us think. We usually get a good (and direct) impression of whether a citizen was satisfied with the outcome of a complaint call.

We know if we are falling behind on processing building permit applications, or if the grass is getting too tall in the park. In some areas, we need to gather some statistics (for example, the number of items checked out per librarian) or do some processing (quality of treated wastewater), but these tend to be the exception, not the rule.

Mastery-oriented individuals will be motivated by goals and direct feedback alone. When the supervisor sets the goals with the employee and makes sure the feedback mechanism is in place, the supervisor's job is done (of course, the supervisor needs to monitor the feedback, too; without this, a mastery-oriented individual might switch goals to mastering the next level of World of Warcraft!).

For a performance-oriented individual, though, praise and acknowledgement of met goals by the supervisor is necessary, and it is a motivator for setting higher goals for the next round of work.

Like it or not, though, telling performance-oriented individuals that they didn't meet a goal is a demotivator, and *it actually decreases future performance* (Dweck and Leggett 1988). Rather than using criticism, a better strategy is to help the employee find strategies to succeed in meeting the goal or to reduce the goal so it is in fact possible to achieve.

Performance-oriented people seek out situations in which they can excel, and they avoid situations where they won't. If the manager wants to motivate this kind of individual to greater performance, the best way to do it is to identify ways that the individual can achieve a series of smaller successes that lead to the larger goal.

I have come to believe that annual performance reviews serve no useful purpose and should, in most cases, be abolished. The research clearly supports the view that annual reviews have no motivational value, and in many cases they reduce motivation and subsequent performance. At the same time, I doubt that many of us spend as much time as we should reviewing and setting specific goals for our employees. We should be doing this frequently, throughout the year.

Summary

Here, in a nutshell, are some of the things we can take away from research in the field of the psychology of work motivation:

• Set challenging and specific goals for employees.

- For complex or new tasks, set a goal of learning or mastering the task. For other tasks, set a goal that specifies performance (quantity and quality).
- Supervisors should explain the relevance and importance of the goals that are set, and they should discuss the goals with the employee to make sure that the goals are both achievable and challenging.
- Performance-oriented employees need to be given the tools and shown the steps necessary to achieve the goals. Training, modeling, and conveying confidence in the employee's abilities can increase their chance of success and maximize their future performance.
- Goal setting and goal discussions should occur as often as necessary, which is probably more often than is being done now.
- All employees need direct and immediate feedback on progress toward goals.
- Performance-oriented employees need recognition and praise when they achieve their goals. Pointing out that they didn't meet their goals is demotivating, and it reduces future performance. Instead, the manager should help the employee with strategies to achieve the goals.
- Annual performance reviews do not motivate employees. **PM**

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Callouts:

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