



The Morale and Motivation Myth ... No Strings Attached!

“Productive people are happy people: learning, development, achievement, and success pave the path to high morale.”

—Rick Tate,
Senior Managing Partner
Impact Achievement Group

Imagine the excitement of observing a successful, high-achieving workplace. The employees clearly have high morale and engagement, and that gives you confidence in your theories about the relationship between employee productivity and morale. If you can boost morale, then employees will become more productive. That reasoning results in heavy investments of time and money to build morale and employee recognition programs aimed at creating happy employees.

A recent Google search of articles related to employee motivation revealed that the majority of content in this area is directed at creating “happy employees” or “happy work environments” for the purpose of improving business results and productivity. In our recent research with our partner, HRmarketer, 85 percent of responders believed that increasing employee morale and happiness is the critical path to higher employee productivity. For over 40 years the tenet that “happy employees are productive employees” has been the driving force and underlying mental model for employee motivation practices and management training.

We recognize that for many, this is a very touchy subject. We also recognize that to deal with this subject in any reasonable fashion takes more than a short article on the subject. Our aim is to tweak your curiosity and, hopefully, to influence a more thorough examination of how employee motivation is addressed in the workplace. We hope to challenge some existing assumptions and provide an impetus to further exploration. And we don’t mind being provocative while doing it, if necessary.

Motivation Isn’t a Bribe

Morale isn’t something that can be bought. The work environment has to provide people with opportunities to succeed, to do their best, to be trusted, to be valued, and to be respected. As the research below will demonstrate, reaching potential, success on the job, achieving business results, personal productivity and achievement, and meaningful inclusion and participation are the essential elements that foster personal motivation. Then productivity has the required foundation so that morale and employee happiness becomes the “by-product.” “Productive people are happy people” comes closer to the truth than conventional wisdom has led us to believe.

The research, both empirical and face-valid, has long supported the notion that intrinsic elements are far more genuine and sustaining than the reliance on extrinsic methods of motivation. Look at the seminal work of pioneering psychologist Fredric Herzberg from years past. He illustrated the difference between dissatisfiers and satisfiers—noting that the absence of dissatisfiers did not lead to satisfaction and motivation. His research indicated that people would be dissatisfied (unmotivated) when issues such as pay, status, policies, working conditions, and interpersonal relations were in question. However, he noted that performance motivation comes only with the presence of the ability to achieve, challenging work, increased responsibility, opportunities for growth and development, and earned recognition for accomplishment. This well-documented research supports our observation that happy people are not necessarily productive—*but productive people are happy people.*

Ongoing work by the Gallup organization on employee engagement supports the work of Herzberg and others. Gallup created the Q12, a set of 12 questions to determine employee engagement, based on thousands of interviews and focus groups. Employees with high Q12 scores exhibit lower turnover, higher sales growth, better productivity, better customer loyalty and other manifestations of superior performance. The bulk of these questions focus on such factors as development opportunities, understanding of expectations, opportunities to do great work, and having one's work acknowledged and validated. The latest Gallup survey shows that only 29 percent of employees are engaged—leaving 71 percent of workers either non-engaged or actively disengaged. And the 2011 SHRM/Globeforce Employee Recognition Survey revealed that although 80 percent of organizations have a recognition program, less than a third of HR professionals (31 percent) believe that employees are satisfied with the level of recognition they receive for doing a good job. Clearly, “recognition” programs are missing the mark.

The reliance of external morale improvement activities and unearned recognition popularity contests for the purpose of improving business results and employee productivity has seen its day. They have never delivered the hoped-for results and merely allow managers to shift the responsibility for employee motivation. If morale doesn't improve, resulting in employee productivity remaining flat, it is then a problem with the “program,” not the quality of performance management practices in the workplace.

The challenge is clear: motivation to perform comes from within, and that motivation won't be successful with an emphasis on extrinsic lures. And if there is a bribe involved, the unintended consequences are profound. With strings attached, the “if—then” approach to motivation erases any

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connection to truly earned rewards and recognition. Alfie Kohn, noted author and expert on rewards and recognition, refers to the bribery technique for motivation as “wreck-ignition.” We concur!

Turning Morale on Its Head

Thus we come to a bold but empirically defensible statement: employee happiness and morale is NOT the critical path to employee productivity. Much of what we believe about human motivation just isn't so. Too often organizations are operating on assumptions about human productivity and performance that are essentially unexamined with any rigor and rooted in folklore more than science. This is evidenced by the continual rollouts of employee recognition programs directed at stimulating employee motivation—hoping for improved productivity. These programs come and go, soon dying on the vine as a result of not capturing the “hearts” of employees, and often creating more employee cynicism than motivation.

Management then becomes shocked at this employee reaction to their genuine attempts to create workplace “happiness.” But why the shock? One can only wonder what other reaction humans would have to being the victim of practices used with livestock, rats, and pigeons.

Stop the Insanity

We continue to attempt to capture the hearts and minds of employees by dangling tastier carrots or wielding sharper sticks. Should we continue to deal with employees in the same manner we use with rats? Who wouldn't consider this treatment offensive? When we look at the traditional carrot and stick theory of motivation (and at the actual research), we must admit that it does not work well, if at all, once people have reached an adequate, subsistence level. Beyond health, food, clothing, and shelter, people tend to be motivated by higher-level needs. Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs shows us that people who have their basic needs met direct their attention toward belonging, responsibility, respect and achievement. Management cannot provide people with the respect of others, with self-respect, with a sense of achievement, or with pride. It can only create working conditions that provide opportunities for people to seek these things out for themselves. Why then do we continue to try to bribe or punish our way to superior performance? There is a certain level of insanity present when we attempt to implement a practice that has worked so poorly.

To truly understand what motivates individuals to do their best, to give their discretionary effort, we must acknowledge that many of the past

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accepted motivational practices are in direct conflict with human nature. In many cases, the application of these practices is akin to digging channels *uphill* to increase the water flow! An organization, for example, identifies performance difficulties with employees. Recognizing that the employees know how to perform the tasks in question, the immediate assumption is that there is a “motivation” problem, and typical motivation and morale improvement programs are applied in order to improve performance.

- Donuts in the morning?
- A Friday pizza party?
- An employee of the month program?
- Letters of recognition?
- Monetary awards?

Most of these types of motivational techniques assume that employees need to be fixed—that there is something wrong with them. Where is the evidence? Where is the test of that theory? There is no evidence or test—only managerial knee-jerk reactions. These techniques don’t create sustained, improved performance—although employees will accept the “goodies.” None of the above changes any elements of the actual performance environment.

Is the lack of “goodies” the reason people don’t give their best effort at work? Will recognition and praise for performance instill pride when people don’t own the work they do, aren’t involved in a meaningful way, don’t feel respected and trusted, and don’t feel they personally influence the outcomes of their tasks or assignments? Again, let’s stop this insanity and acknowledge the true nature of people’s motivation in the workplace.

The Critical Path

The real critical path to high performance requires more effectiveness from managers and supervisors. Rather than rely on poorly performing “extrinsic” motivation programs, the development of their performance management skills is the dependent variable for creating productivity and morale in the workplace. An interesting aspect of our latest research with HRmarketer supports this premise. While it can’t be disputed that retention is affected the most by compensation and benefits, the responders stated that the top three elements that were the pathway to high performance were (1) effective coaching skills, (2) employee growth and development, and (3) performance accountability. These three

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elements cannot be delivered through extrinsic motivation and morale-boosting programs.

Intrinsic motivation is of essential importance for all business activities. We cannot continue on the “morale hamster wheel”—mainly relying on external incentives to stimulate employee discretionary effort. When people learn, grow, achieve, and contribute—when they are part of a successful, winning organization—we capture the genuine morale and happiness that we observe in high-performing organizations.

Summary

As long as we hang on to the long-held myth that morale leads to productivity, then managers can rely on the organization and “motivation and morale programs” to be responsible for morale and motivation. They can essentially ignore their responsibility for acquiring management competencies that foster excellent coaching and performance management practices. They can avoid the accountability of being effective leaders and managers. And they can expect the continued downward trend of employee engagement and morale.

The belief that *productive people are happy people* will lead to the type of management training that will foster high performance. Employee morale and happiness are not the critical path to employee productivity—but productivity and employee achievement are the critical path to high morale and a happy work environment. Morale and employee happiness aren't the means to the end—they are the end itself.

About Impact Achievement Group

Impact Achievement Group is a training and performance management consulting company that provides assessments, coaching, story-based interactive workshops, and simulations for managers at all levels of organizations worldwide. Impact Achievement Group helps companies dramatically improve management and leadership competency for bottom-line results. Company experts Rick Tate and Julie White, Ph.D. are internationally recognized authorities in leadership development, human performance, customer-focused business strategies and workplace communications.

To find out how Impact Achievement Group can transform your managers into effective leaders, visit www.impactachievement.com.

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