

The Top Ten Ironies of Motivation

By Bob Nelson

“Motivation” is one of those words that is commonly used to describe the fuzzy notion of “why we do what we do.” There are numerous ironies about motivation that make the topic all the more difficult to understand. By examining these ironies more closely, we can avoid their pitfalls. Following, then, are what I consider the top ten ironies of motivation.

Irony #1

Most managers think money is the top motivator — it’s not.

What employees really want is to be valued for a job well done by those they hold in high esteem. As Mary Kay Ash, founder of Mary Kay Cosmetics says, “Imagine that every person is wearing a sign around their neck which says ‘make me feel important.’” This could not be more true than in business today. Sure compensation is important, but most employees consider it a right — an exchange for the work one does. As management consultant Rosabeth Moss Kanter puts it, “Compensation is a right; recognition is a gift.”

According to Catherine Meek, president of Meek Associates, a compensation consulting firm, “In the twenty years I have been consulting, and the thousands of employees I have interviewed in hundreds of companies, if I had to pick one thing that comes through to me loud and clear it’s that organizations do a lousy job of recognizing people’s contributions. That is the number one thing employ-

ees say to us. ‘We don’t care about the money; if my boss would just say thank you, if he or she would just acknowledge that I exist. The only time I hear anything is when I screw up. I never hear when I do a good job.’”

Study after study has shown that what tends to motivate employees to put forth their best efforts and to perform at higher levels are praise and recognition. People want to feel they are making a contribution at work, and for most individuals this is a function of having the respect of peers and colleagues, having managers who tell them when they do a good job, and being involved and informed about what’s going on in their department or organization.

The little things that show appreciation and that add meaning to employees’ jobs are countless. When paychecks go out, write a note on the envelope recognizing an employee’s accomplishment. Feature the employee in the company newsletter. Have the company president or manager’s manager call an employee to thank him or her for a job well done. Create a pass around award. Leave a voice mail praising. Distribute a positive e-mail. Read positive letters from customers or clients in your staff meetings. The list is almost endless; the principle is clear. According to Frances Hesselbein, President of The Drucker Foundation, “People want to feel what they do makes a difference.” Money does not do this; personal recognition does.

Irony #2

What motivates others is often different from what motivates oneself.

Classic studies about what workers want from their jobs were conducted by Lawrence Lindahl in the late 1940s and repeated with similar results in the early 1980s and 1990s. Managers identified good wages, job security, and promotion/growth opportunities as the primary reasons why they felt their employees worked. Employees, on the other hand, reported intangibles such as appreciation for work done, feeling “in” on things, and empathetic managers as what they most wanted from their jobs. When workers and supervisors were asked to rank a list of motivators from 1 to 10 in order of their importance to workers, workers rated “appreciation for a job well done” as their top motivator; supervisors ranked it eighth. Employees ranked “feeling in on things” as being #2 in importance; their managers ranked it last at #10.

To have a motivating work environment, this perception gap between managers and employees must be closed. Managers must be sure to reward the behavior they desire with recognition that is valued and meaningful to their employees — not just themselves. To do this, managers must start with the motivational needs of their employees and build from there. Ask employees what they want! This can be done in one-on-one discussions or by other techniques, such as giving an employee an index card to list items they find motivating as some managers do at BankBoston in Boston, MA. One financial analyst there told me that she listed “time off,” “lunch with her manager,” and “Starbucks coffee,” on her index card, returned it to her manager and promptly forgot about it. She was elated, however, a month or so later, when after finishing a project she found a coupon for Starbucks coffee on her desk with a personal note of thanks from her manager. The fact that her

manager took the time to find out what would be meaningful to her and then used that information in a timely way left quite an impression.

You can also conduct a survey to discuss what would be meaningful recognition with your work group or in a staff meeting. As you involve those you are trying to motivate, not only are you likely to be more on the mark, but others will more likely take ownership of the recognition program or activities. Involvement equals commitment and the best management is what you do with others, not to them.

Irony #3

Things that are the most motivating to employees tend to be relatively easy to do and cost the least.

Personally recognizing employees’ accomplishments can be easy to do as well. In a study of potential workplace motivators by Dr. Gerald Graham, professor of management at Wichita State University, three of the top five incentives ranked by employees had no cost, even though they were seldom done by employees’ managers: (1) a personal thank you from one’s manager for a job well done; (2) a written thank you from one’s manager for a job well done; and (3) public praise. When these forms of recognition are done in a timely, sincere, and specific manner, employees feel valued and appreciated.

Most companies also overlook the power and possibilities of no-cost recognition and rewards. Many of the following methods can also be done within the context of most every job in the workplace.

Interesting and important work: Everyone should have at least part of their job be of interest to them. Find out what tasks your employees most enjoy and use that information in future work assignments. Although OurTown Television Productions of Saratoga

Springs, New York, wasn't able to offer its employees the same high salaries as its competition, it did offer its employees jobs custom-tailored to the individual tastes of each worker. For example, the company's story coordinator is also the staff welder because he told one of OurTown's founders that he loved welding

Information, communication, and feedback on performance: Information is power, and your employees want to be empowered with the information they need to know to do their jobs better and more effectively. And, more than ever, employees want to know how they are doing in their jobs and how the company is doing in its business. The Michigan Retailers' Association threw a series of catered staff breakfasts on the Friday morning following each of five board of directors' meetings. The breakfasts were used to share information and update staff on major policy actions and organizational developments. Open the channels of communication in your organization to allow employees to be informed, ask questions, and share information.

Involvement and ownership in decisions: Involving employees, especially in decisions that affect them, is both respectful to them and practical. People that are the closest to the problem or customer typically have the best insight as to how to improve a situation. Involving employees in decision making, especially when the decisions affect them directly, is both respectful and practical. Those closest to the problem typically have the best insight as to what to do. As you involve others, you increase their commitment and ease in implementing new ideas or change. Owner Katherine Barchetti assigns each of the salespeople at her self-named clothing stores in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, the responsibility for particular items of merchandise, for example, a particular brand and style of belt. Salespeople are granted authority to fully manage the product line that they have been

assigned including buying, maintaining inventory, marketing, and selling it.

Independence, autonomy, and flexibility: Most employees value being given room to do their job as they best see fit. All employees appreciate having flexibility in their jobs. Giving people latitude increases the chance that they will perform as you desire — and bring additional initiative, ideas, and energy to their jobs. All employees at Meredith Publishing in Des Moines, Iowa, must work the "core hours" between 10:00 A.M. and 3:00 P.M. However, they are allowed to set their own starting and ending schedules as long as they adhere to the core hour requirement. This allows workers to arrive as early as 6:00 A.M. or as late as 10:00 A.M., and to leave as early as 3:00 P.M. or as late as 6:00 P.M.

Increased opportunity for learning, growth, and responsibility: Everyone appreciates getting credit when it is due. Occasions to share the successes of employees with others are almost limitless. Giving your employees new opportunities to perform, learn, and grow as a form of recognition and thanks is highly motivating for most people. Management at American Honda Motor Co., Inc., located in Marysville, Ohio, creates energizing opportunities for its employees by assigning them high-risk, high-reward projects. New model development includes trips to Japan, new technology, short timelines, and lots of visibility. Says John Ball, manager of service training, "So when you pull off a successful new model segment, you're a hero!"

Irony #4

While there is a place for formal awards, the greatest impact in using such awards comes from their symbolic value.

The recognition value, that is, the intangible, symbolic, and emotional value, of any award is by far the most motivating aspect for

employees. Formal awards are useful for acknowledging significant accomplishments, especially as they span a long period. They can also lend credibility to more spontaneous, informal rewards used regularly by management.

Still, recognizing employees with money, merchandise, or plaques to motivate them can have negative effects. When emphasis is placed on the award, rather than the performance, employees are often given the wrong signal. Cecil Hill, corporate manager of improvement programs at Hughes Aircraft Company, claims, “I have found that certain aspects of the cash awards approach would be counterproductive at Hughes Aircraft. For example, cash awards would reduce teamwork as employees concentrated primarily on individual cash gains. We have also found instances where ‘pay’ for certain types of intellectual performance tends to denigrate the performance.”

To get the most out of formal awards, and to make sure that the focus of the award remains on the performance and achievement — not the award itself — managers must be skilled in how they present such awards.

Present awards in a public forum. Awards are not meant to be presented in the privacy of an employee’s office. Tag onto or schedule a special meeting for the occasion to place an employee “in the limelight.” Besides honoring the individual who performed well, recognition is also a message to other employees about the type of performance that gets noticed in an organization. According to management consultant Rosabeth Moss Kanter, “To the rest of the organization, recognition creates role models — heroes — and communicates the standards: These are the kinds of things that constitute great performance around here.”

Provide a context for the recognition. Managers must provide a context for the achievement and explain how it ties to the

larger objectives of the organization. Will this achievement translate into a new product line, more appreciative clients, ongoing cost savings, or other significant goals? How will the achievement potentially impact the overall success of the organization and each person in it? Providing a broader context adds significance to the achievement and to the person being honored.

Share your feelings. When presenting an award, emphasize your personal feelings about the achievement or the individual who has achieved. Comments such as “I was excited by your success,” or “I’m proud that you are part of my team” gives energy to the presentation. If your positive feelings are honest and sincere, it adds power to the moment that everyone present can feel.



Fun, simple and creative rewards work best to motivate employees.

As Richard File, partner at Amrignon points out, “The way we see it, spending \$1 on something clever and unique is better than spending \$50 on something ordinary and forgettable.” Yet, I find more times than not that fun and simple ideas are not used in many businesses that view their use as inappropriate — somehow undermining the seriousness or credibility of the business.

By contrast, it is often the fun aspects of a celebration that make recognition a positive and motivating experience. The simpler and more creative the better. For example, a Hewlett-Packard Company engineer burst into his manager’s office in Palo Alto, California, to announce he’d just found the solution to a problem the group had been struggling with for many weeks. His manager quickly groped around his desk for some item to acknowledge the accomplishment and ended up handing the employee a banana from his lunch with the words, “Well done. Congratulations!”

Initially, the employee was puzzled, but over time the Golden Banana Award became one of the most prestigious honors bestowed on an inventive employee in that division.

At Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida, one of their 180 recognition programs is called “The Spirit of Fred Award,” termed for an employee named Fred. When Fred first went from an hourly to a salaried employee, five people taught him the values necessary for success at Disney. He helped to inspire the award, in which the name “Fred” became an acronym for Friendly, Resourceful, Enthusiastic, and Dependable. First given as a lark, the award has come to be highly coveted in the organization.

As these examples illustrate, meaningful recognition can truly be created out of thin air!



When you recognize performance, not only will you get more of that behavior, but that’s also when it means the most to employees.

One of Dr. Graham’s conclusions to the study referenced earlier is that the most motivating incentives as reported by employees are based on performance. People don’t want something for nothing, as much as they want something for something — recognition for a job well done. When someone you hold in high esteem at work notices when you performed well and does something to acknowledge your efforts and results, that’s when it means the most to us. In addition, employees are highly motivated by activities that directly affect the company’s bottom line. Robert Hauptfuhrer, chairman and CEO of Oryx Energy points out that “Give people a chance not just to do a job but to have some impact, and they’ll really respond, get on their roller skates, and race around to make sure it happens.” Other examples abound:

The president of the Pizza Hut fast-food chain asked employees how to eliminate needless paperwork and tasks and improve their working conditions. The result was a company with fewer layers of management, less corporate paperwork, and a 40 percent growth in sales.

Goodyear Tire & Rubber, headquartered in Akron, Ohio, believes that providing employees with good company information is motivating. At Goodyear all workers can access computer files providing information about themselves, their department and their plant. Each shift tracks its own productivity. The results are posted on marker boards displayed on the shop floor and updated frequently.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car, headquartered in St. Louis, posts the financial results of every branch office and region in plain view of all employees. A friendly rivalry between branch offices ensues, which translates into motivated employees who want to perform at their best at all times. New Jersey manager Woody Erhardt holds his fingers an inch apart and says, “We’re this close to beating out Middlesex.” He continues, “If they lose, they have to throw a party for us, and we get to decide what they wear.”



It takes less effort to sustain desired behavior and performance than it does to initially to create it.

Once you have achieved desired behavior, recognition need not be as immediate or as frequent. Reinforcement theory tells us that after new behavior as been established, it can best be perpetuated through intermittent reinforcement. This means don’t forget the behavior you wanted on an ongoing basis just because a program to promote it has ended. Selective ongoing emphasis on the behavior can perpetuate results — and at a fraction of the original time and cost.

Keep communicating about performance and achievement. Carry articles about continued results and examples of successes in your organization's newsletter or call them out publicly in meetings. For example, employee suggestions can continue to be highlighted by noting company savings from each suggestion or by interviewing top suggesters to encourage role modeling. And, have management individually thank employees who have continued to perform as desired. In the hallway, on voice mail, on a post-it note — keep saying “thanks” and “good job.” You don't have to do it as often, but you do have to continue doing it is some way to perpetuate ongoing results.

Tektronix, Inc., a manufacturer of electronic instruments located in Beaverton, OR, instituted a simple way for managers and employees alike to focus on recognizing others for doing something right. Simple memo pads were printed that had a cartoon and the heading “You Done Good Award,” which could be given to anybody in the company from anybody else in the company. On it, individuals state what was done, who did it and when, and then give the memo to the person. By providing this vehicle for employees to thank one another, praising happens much more often. The idea has caught on and is now part of life at Tektronix. Says Joe Floren, former communications manager for Tektronix, “Even though people say nice things to you, it means something more when people take the time to write their name on a piece of paper and say it. Employees usually post them next to their desks.”

AT&T Universal Card Services in Jacksonville, FL, uses the World of Thanks award as one of more than 40 recognition and rewards program. It's a pad of colored paper shaped like a globe with “Thank You” written all over it in different languages. Anyone in the company can write a message of thanks to someone else and send it to that person. The

program is extremely popular — in four years they have used over 130,000 such notes.

Ideally, you want to make changes to your systems to help perpetuate desired behaviors, such as hiring, orientation training, evaluation and promotion guidelines. For example, at Disney they place a high value on service and assure this value is integrated into their culture, by how they hire, orient, train, and promote people based in part on one's service attitude.

Irony #8

Managers don't tend to focus on employee motivation until it's lost.

So often, managers are too busy focusing on what's urgent, such as dealing with daily crises in their jobs, and forget about regularly motivating and recognizing employees. That is, they forget about it — until motivation is lost. Morale sinks, employees quit — and then management must scramble to figure out ways to energize and motivate employees. At this point, regenerating poor morale is much more difficult than doing little things along the way to keep it high.

The same type of scenario is often played out as smaller companies grow. Smaller businesses have a lot of inherent motivators — variety of jobs, more direct contact with top management, more room for advancement, etc. But, as a company grows, these types of motivators disappear and management often fails to supplement them with other forms of recognition. The situation is often made worse by the increase of demotivators, such as more bureaucracy, policy manuals, approval processes, and the like.

In either situation, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Don't wait until motivations and moral is lost to value what you have. Management should strive to consistently keep motivation and energy high. For example, to keep up morale, Bar-Nunn

Transportation of Granger, Iowa, provides its driver with two monthly publications — a newsletter and a four-hour cassette tape loaded with industry and company news, country music, information on company benefits, and personalized messages such as birthday announcements. Since creating these, the company has experienced a 35 percent reduction in its turnover rate.

To keep employee morale and energy at high levels during particularly busy times of the year, executives at the Cigna Group, an insurance company headquartered in Hartford, Connecticut, personally push coffee carts around the office, serving drinks and refreshments to their front-line partners. Not only do employees appreciate this gesture by management, but they have the opportunity to bring up and resolve customer issues at the same time.

Vice presidents at Nobel/Sysco, a food distribution company in Denver, conduct regular employee appreciation lunches where they cook and serve the food. As employees pass through the serving line, the vice presidents tell them how much they are appreciated. Ideas like these, and hundreds like them, help maintain a high level of employee motivation.

During stressful times at Maritz Performance Improvement Co., in St. Louis, MO, they use the “Thanks a Bunch” award. Someone brings in a bunch of flowers to give a hardworking employee who keeps one flower and card and passes on the bunch to another performer who, in turn, repeats the process. At the end of the day, they collect all the cards, and host a drawing for prizes.



The more you help employees develop marketable skills, the more likely they are to stay with your organization.

The very definition of marketable skills implies that those who have them can be paid

more in the market. Yet, I’m convinced that as you make it a priority to help employees learn and grow, they are more likely to want to stay with you because they know they are in a very special place. If you are not providing such an interest in employees — what skills they want to learn, where they want to be in five years, how they are growing in their jobs — there is nothing that keeps the employee to want stay if he or she gets a job offer elsewhere. When you make it clear that you have their best interests at heart, the payback from employees is tenfold.

According to Adelle DiGiorgio, Corporate Employee Relations Director at Apple Computer, “The message we give employees is that they’re responsible for their career development, but we’ll help them figure out which paths are the best for them to take.” Employers like Apple Computer, and others that are supportive of employee attempts to better themselves — even if it means that they lose good workers — energize their workforce by demonstrating that their first concern is the overall welfare of the employees.

Management at Novartis (formerly Sandoz Pharmaceuticals Corporation) based in Basel, Switzerland, lets its employees know that it does not consider them disloyal for considering career paths that lead outside the company. Novartis believes that offering employees ways to enhance their future employability alleviates the anxiety connected with losing a job and demonstrates that the company truly cares about them as people.

Skill development is especially motivational for today’s younger “Generation X” workforce. This generation constantly wants to learn new skills, both to keep the job exciting and challenging as well as to increase their marketability. In the words of Liesel Walsh, a consultant with Big Picture Marketing in Charleston, MA, and a Gen-Xer herself, “Manage me by teaching me things. Young

workers today see themselves as marketable commodities, as an item for sale. So, if management can help them to see how an assignment we give them today makes them more marketable, how it builds their resume, that really motivates them.”

Irony #10

You get what you reward is common sense, but far from common practice in most organizations.

Everyone likes to be appreciated. Results of a recent survey by the Council of Communication Management confirm what almost every employee already knows: that recognition for a job well done is the top motivator of employee performance. Yet, how many managers, however, consider “appreciating others” to be a major function of their job today? Not many. Most managers fail to use the potential power of recognition and rewards. This is true even though 33% of managers themselves report that they would rather work in an organization where they could receive better recognition.

At a time when employees are being asked to do more than ever before — to make suggestions for continuous improvement, to handle complex problems quickly, and to act independently in the best interest of the company — the resources and support for helping them is at an all time low. What used to be common courtesies have been overcome by speed and technology in today’s businesses. Managers tend to be too busy and too removed from their employees to notice when they have done exceptional work — and to thank them for it. Technology has replaced personal interaction

with one’s manager with constant interfacing with one’s terminal. John Naisbitt predicted this would happen over a decade ago in his book *Megatrends*. He said the more our work environments become highly technical, the greater the employee need would become to be more personal and human. He called the phenomenon “high-tech/high-touch.” And all this is happening at a time in which employees are looking to have greater meaning in their lives — and in their jobs. The irony of the situation is that what motivates people the most takes so relatively little to do — just a little time and thoughtfulness for starters. Whatever your situation, start today to build on what’s being done to make employees feel valued for the work they do.

Summary

Isn’t it ironic? “Motivation” is a term that is so widely used, yet many managers know little about how it really works. But the concept doesn’t have to be confusing — in fact, it’s quite simple. “It’s up to you to decide how to speak to your people,” says Mary Kay Ash. “Do you single out individuals for public praise and recognition? Make people who work for you feel important. If you honor and serve them, they’ll honor and serve you.” Remember, if your employees are your greatest assets, treat them as such and you will reap the rewards.

To book Dr. Bob Nelson to present to your conference, association or company, contact him at bob@drbobnelson.com or by phone at 1(858)673-0690. Originally published in *Employee Benefit News*. ♦