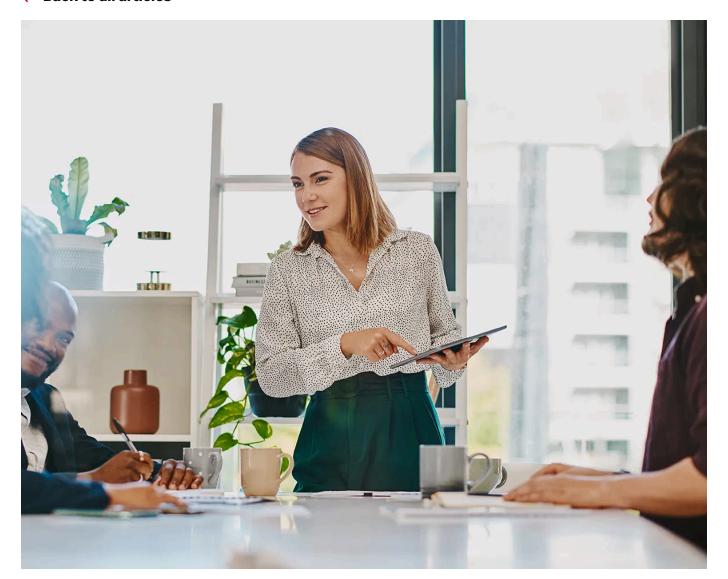Northeastern University
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How To Motivate Employees: 5 Data-Backed Tips for Managers

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Gallup data shows that only 34 percent of all workers in the U.S. are engaged in the workplace. Unfortunately for businesses, the cost of this disengagement is high. It's estimated between $450 billion and $550 billion are wasted each year due to lost engagement in the U.S. alone.

As a manager, you're likely acutely aware of the negative effects of disengaged employees. What you may not know, though, is how to go about boosting employee engagement so that the people you manage feel invested in their work and are empowered to not only meet but exceed expectations.

One of the most effective ways that managers can boost their direct reports' motivation is through effective communication. Below, find tips for managers to keep employees motivated and working toward your organization's shared strategic goals.

5 tips to motivate your employees

1. Recognize a job well done.

When it comes to motivating your employees, it doesn't take much to send a positive message. An act as simple as praising your team members for doing good work can have a tremendous impact on employee morale.

The psychology behind this is clear: Positive feedback helps your employees feel valued in their roles. When someone feels valued, they are more motivated to continue performing at their highest levels. Data reveals they are also less likely to quit their current job within the next year.

2. Allow your employees to demonstrate a healthy level of autonomy.

Research suggests that workers who experience higher levels of workplace autonomy report higher levels of job-related well-being. Specifically, increased flexibility as to where work takes place (office vs. home setting), schedule, pace of work, and the order in which tasks are completed all contributed to higher levels of employee satisfaction.

If you're unsure how to begin incorporating autonomy into your organization's workflows, start slowly. You don't need to go from one extreme (fully dependent employees) to the other extreme

(fully autonomous employees) overnight. There are, however, some easy-to-implement strategies you can use to give your employees more agency over their work.

For example, you might give employees more flexibility over their work schedule and setting (e.g., remote or in the office) as a reward for hitting individual or company goals. Or you might adjust your management style so that you manage critical milestones but give your employees the flexibility they desire to execute the tasks required to get there.

3. Include your employees in goal setting.

In their *Employee Engagement Research Update*, BlessingWhite Research asked respondents to identify the item that would most improve their performance. Twenty percent of all respondents—including almost a third of disengaged workers—cited "greater clarity about what the organization needs me to do and why" as their top answer.

This data illustrates why goal-setting is a critical process that should involve your employees every step of the way, instead of not just including management in a vacuum. When employees understand the goals of the company, it's easier for them to recognize how their actions can directly impact progress toward those goals.

According to the report, this alignment can have positive results on employee engagement and motivation. "Increasingly, we find that a key to building engagement in most organisations is a focus on alignment," it says. "Never assume that staff understand and are able to align to what the organisation needs.

4. Facilitate respectful relationships.

Respect is a powerful motivator in many relationships, including those between managers and their employees. According to a 2022 Pew Research study, the majority of workers who quit their jobs the prior year cited low pay, limited opportunities for advancement, or feeling disrespected as a reason for leaving. Another survey showed that in a poll of more than 1,000 early-career professionals, respectful communication was more important than work perks previous generations of employees preferred.

It's clear, then, that taking the relatively small step of respecting your employees isn't just good manners—it's good business sense. Whether you are meeting with your employees one-on-one, sending them an email, giving them feedback, or resolving conflict, do your part to encourage a respectful exchange.

5. Rethink your performance review process.

Performance reviews are one of the most common tools used by businesses and management to measure employee success. In theory, these reviews allow management to indicate how well an

employee is meeting expectations, progressing toward their goals, and contributing to the company's success, all in an attempt to improve engagement and motivate the employee to perform better.

Unfortunately, reality often does not match the theory. According to consulting firm WTW, only 26 percent of North American companies surveyed reported that their performance management systems were effective, with about one third reporting that employees felt they were fairly evaluated.

If you are concerned that your performance reviews do not have the positive impact you'd like them to, there are steps you can take to improve the process. For example, instead of annual reviews, you might make a switch to six-month or quarterly reviews to make employee feedback more actionable, or you might embrace more individualized scoring to account for unique employee needs and duties.

Motivating employees requires clear communication

In management, few skills are more important to have than an ability to communicate with your employees and team members clearly and effectively. In fact, for each of the tips above, communication is the key to success:

- Recognizing when an employee meets and exceeds expectations is all about communicating appreciation and value.

- Allowing your employees to become more autonomous in how they work requires you to communicate expectations clearly and to effectively delegate tasks.

- Including your employees in goal setting requires you to communicate what are sometimes complex strategic goals in a way that nonexecutives can understand.

- Embracing respectful relationships with your staff requires you to understand multiple layers of social and business etiquette.

- Effectively reviewing employee performance means that you must be clear in your expectations and also collaborative in identifying goals and paths for improvement.

As a manager or leader within your organization, it is critical that you fully develop your communication skills in order to manage your staff and employees. As with any other skill, practice and consistency are the keys to becoming an effective communicator—but it *is* possible to jump-start your professional development in this area as well. Earning a graduate degree in corporate and organization communication, for example, can help you lay the foundation for a successful career.

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