The Basic Principles of Employee Motivation (And How To Put Them Into Practice)

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While there are many principles that underlie and inform employee motivation, there are a few basic principles that are foundational to employee motivation.

These principles are also closely tied to employee experience (https://businessleadershiptoday.com/What-is-employee-experience/) and employee engagement (https://businessleadershiptoday.com/The-7-Factors-of-Employee-Engagement/). Strategies that support a positive employee experience and high employee engagement can also generate high levels of employee motivation.

The basic principles of employee motivation are a sense of purpose, belonging, a positive work environment, autonomy, growth, and recognition. These principles can guide leaders in implementing strategies that help employees meet their needs, reach their full potential, and deliver superior performance.

In this article, I'll discuss these principles and provide some strategies leaders can use to improve the employee experience in their organizations.

What Is Employee Motivation and Why Is It So Important (and So Challenging)?

Employee motivation (https://www.inc.com/encyclopedia/employee-motivation.html) is the level of energy, commitment, and creativity that employees bring to their jobs and describes (https://blog.empuls.io/what-is-employee-motivation/) how invested they are in the work they do, how engaged they are with the organization's goals, and how empowered they feel in their daily work to achieve those goals and reach their full potential.

Motivated employees are inspired to adhere to certain behaviors and engage in actions that result in positive rewards. They find satisfaction in doing their jobs well because they like what they do.

There are two types of motivation:

- **Extrinsic motivation** – Motivation to participate in an activity based on meeting an external goal, earning praise or approval, winning a contest or competition, or receiving an award or payment.
- **Intrinsic motivation** (https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/neuro.12.006.2007/full#:~:text=Intrinsic%20motivation%20is%20define – Motivation to do an activity for its inherent rewards rather than for a separable consequence.

Motivated employees are better at adapting to change, better at collaborating, more willing to go above and beyond for a project, customer, or co-worker, and maintain a positive attitude at work. They are also less likely to quit or miss work.

Often, managers fail to grasp how vital employee motivation is to an organization's future success. Or they mistakenly think that extrinsic motivators like compensation are enough to motivate team members to consistently perform well.

While both kinds of motivation are essential, intrinsic motivation is particularly important because intrinsically motivated employees are happier in their roles and more productive.
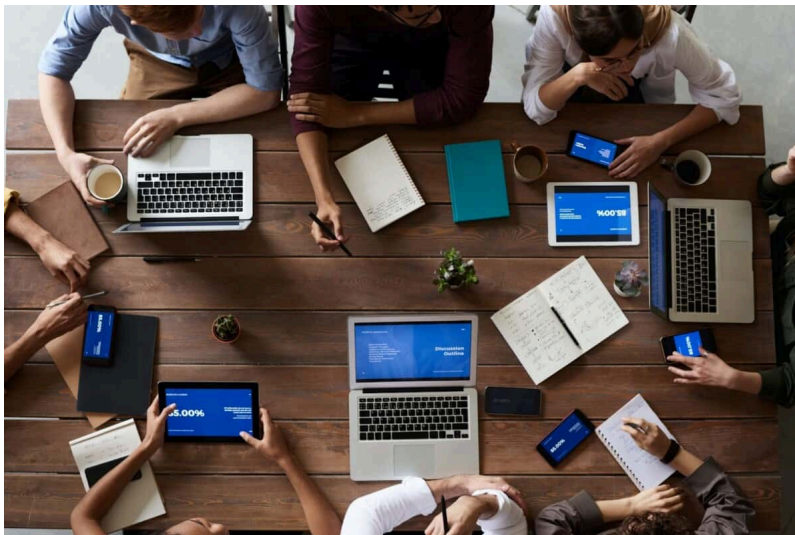
Tapping into an employee's intrinsic motivation can be more challenging than relying on extrinsic motivation because what motivates one employee won't necessarily motivate their co-worker, but the value intrinsically motivated employees add to organizations makes it worth the effort.

Key Principles of Employee Motivation

There are many factors that play a role in employee motivation, but the key principles of employee motivation that drive employees to consistently perform well revolve around building intrinsic motivation through purpose, belonging, a positive work environment, autonomy, growth, and recognition.

Purpose

Purpose gives work meaning and inspires performance.

According to McKinsey & Company (https://www.mckinsey.com/capabilities/people-and-organizational-performance/our-insights/the-organization-blog/making-work-meaningful-from-the-c-suite-to-the-frontline), over the past 30 years, American workers have identified meaningful work as the most important aspect of a job—more important than income, job security, and the number of hours they work.

Humans have an innate need to seek out meaning in their lives—even their work lives. Helping your team members to see a bigger purpose in their work, find meaning in their day-to-day duties, and see the impact of the work they do can have a positive effect on motivation.

Meaningful work has a purpose and creates an impact. When employees view their work as purposeful and impactful, they are committed to their work because they want to make a positive impact.

For many people, work helps them meet their need to accomplish goals and make a difference in the world. Having a job where the work one does is purposeful and has a deeper meaning beyond the daily tasks improves motivation.

Belonging

Belonging increases psychological safety and makes collaboration possible.

A sense of belonging at work keeps morale high, improves cohesion, helps collaboration, and is linked (https://www.ucl.ac.uk/teaching-learning/publications/2020/apr/creating-sense-belonging-your-students) to higher motivation. It also prevents work environments from becoming toxic.

Creating a sense of belonging requires a psychologically safe work environment.

Psychological safety refers to the belief that one will not be punished for asking questions, raising concerns, or voicing ideas.

When a work environment is psychologically safe, employees are encouraged to contribute, participate in decision-making, and build authentic connections with each other.

Employees need to feel psychologically safe at work. They need to feel comfortable bringing their authentic selves to work every day to build authentic connections with their co-workers. A sense of belonging is essential to building team cohesion.

Positive Work Environment

A positive work environment facilitates teamwork and keeps morale high.

To stay motivated, employees need a work environment that offers them a positive employee experience and an inclusive organizational culture where every team member feels empowered and supported.

An inclusive culture (https://businessleadershiptoday.com/What-is-inclusive-culture) is a workplace culture that is supportive of and respectful toward all employees. Organizations with inclusive cultures embrace differences in backgrounds and experiences and build high-performing teams of employees who are engaged with their work and invested in the organization's success.

An inclusive workplace culture ensures that the contributions, talents, skills, and perspectives of all employees are welcomed and utilized in ways that help organizations achieve their vision.

It can also deter toxic behaviors and help team members avoid conflict. Employees cannot stay motivated or maintain high morale in a toxic work environment.

Autonomy

Autonomy gives employees the flexibility they want, increases accountability, and builds trust.

According to a 2021 Jabra report (https://www.jabra.com/hybridwork) on hybrid work, 59% of survey respondents said flexibility is more important to them than salary or other benefits, and 75% said they'd rather work for a company that gives them the flexibility to work from anywhere.

In the Gartner 2021 Digital Worker Experience Survey (https://www.gartner.com/smarterwithgartner/digital-workers-say-flexibility-is-key-to-their-productivity#:~:text=Flexible%20work%20hours%20is%20key,them%20to%20be%20more%20productive.), 43% of respondents said that flexible working hours helped them be more productive, and 30% of respondents said that less or no time commuting allowed them to be more productive.

It's clear that today's workforce demands more flexibility—and that flexibility can have many benefits for organizations in the form of increased productivity. Increasingly, employees want flexibility in the form of autonomy. Flexibility in work schedules, whether it's remote or hybrid work options that increase autonomy or incentives like additional PTO, can be a great motivator for employees.

By giving workers the autonomy and flexibility they need to thrive in both their personal and professional lives, you are forging strong, trust-based relationships with your employees and, at the same time, intrinsically motivating them to hold themselves accountable and take ownership of their roles.

Growth

Growth helps employees achieve their professional goals, develop their skills, and perform better.

When employees have the opportunity to pursue their professional goals and develop their skills, their intrinsic motivation increases. Organizations should offer employees paths to advancement and professional development opportunities to help them satisfy their need for growth.

Paths To Advancement

Did you know that a lack of advancement opportunities (https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2022/03/09/majority-of-workers-who-quit-a-job-in-2021-cite-low-pay-no-opportunities-for-advancement-feeling-disrespected/) was among the top reasons US workers quit their jobs last year?

The need to advance is about more than just a possible increase in compensation. Employees need to feel they are advancing in their careers and are more motivated when they work for organizations where they can see a future for themselves.

When employees feel stuck with no chance for growth or advancement in an organization, they see no future for themselves there. Their motivation suffers because they feel disconnected from long-term goals. This can lead them to seek out other opportunities with organizations where they will have more room to grow and advance.

Professional Development Opportunities

Offering growth and development opportunities, whether it's online training, tuition reimbursement, or leadership development, is a great way to help employees advance in their careers, and it can positively impact employee motivation because it signals to them that they're valued and vital to the organization's future success.

When organizations offer employees opportunities to grow their skills, it empowers them and helps them build the confidence they need to excel in their roles and move into higher-level roles. To determine what development opportunities would best suit an employee's career goals, developmental coaching can point employees in the right direction.

Sara Canaday, author of _Coaching Essentials for Managers: The Tools You Need to Ignite Greatness in Each Employee_ (https://www.amazon.com/Coaching-Essentials-Managers-Greatness-Employee/dp/1264573588/), says developmental coaching can be just as valuable as performance coaching in keeping employees motivated:

The Distinction Between Performance Coaching and Devel…
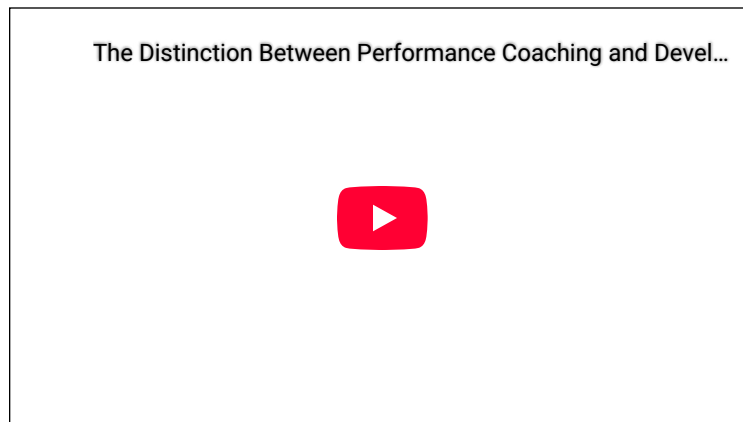
Recognition

Recognition shows employees the impact their work makes and makes them feel valued.

Psychology tells us that recognition in the form of praise is the primary source of positive reinforcement (https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-positive-reinforcement-2795412), the process of modifying behavior for a more positive result. Because of this, recognition (https://businessleadershiptoday.com/how-recognition-affects-employee-motivation/) can be an incredibly powerful motivator.

When employees' contributions are recognized, they are up to 10 times more likely to strongly agree that they belong with the organization, and 80% (https://www.effectory.com/knowledge/why-you-should-be-thinking-about-engagement-and-motivation/#:~:text=Engagement%20is%20a%20sense%20of,required%20to%20actually%20do%20it.) of employees report being more productive when recognition and rewards are utilized to motivate them.

Recognition positively influences employee motivation because acknowledging and celebrating the hard work, achievements, and successes of employees lets them know they are valued and the work they do has an impact.

For recognition to be an effective motivation technique, it needs to be genuine, reference a specific achievement, and single out employees' efforts. It should also be a team effort, with frequent peer-to-peer recognition.

How Does Leadership Influence Employee Motivation?

Leaders play an important role in keeping employees invested in their roles and motivated to do great work. All of their actions and behaviors can either help or hinder the work environment, the organization's culture, and the employee experience and thus impact employee motivation.

Ensuring that the impact they have on motivation is positive requires leadership to have an awareness of employee needs, a commitment to employee success, and a willingness to contribute to the employee experience in ways that help employees connect with their jobs.

Here are a few ways leaders can ensure they are supporting a motivating work environment:

To help employees connect to a greater purpose at work, talk to them about impact.

Effective leaders measure performance with impact. They use impact, rather than quotas or profits, as a measure of success, and help employees see the connection between their day-to-day activities and the larger mission and vision of the organization.

Helping your team members to see a bigger purpose in their work, find meaning in their day-to-day duties, and see the impact of the work they do can have a positive effect on motivation.

To help employees feel a sense of belonging at work, create an atmosphere of trust.

To support a sense of belonging in the workplace, leaders should be committed to policies and strategies that support an accepting and supportive work environment for all employees, strengthen cohesion, cooperation, and collaboration, and build trust.

High-trust work environments are conducive to a high level of employee motivation and have an overwhelmingly positive impact on employee performance, employee well-being, and a host of other factors.

To foster a positive work environment, make inclusion a priority and toxic behaviors unacceptable.

Leaders set the tone for a positive work environment by modeling the behaviors they want to see in their organizations and addressing conflict swiftly so that it doesn't get out of hand, turn culture toxic, and hurt employee morale.

They should also regularly revisit policies and practices to ensure they are inclusive and serve all employees. Inclusion contributes to feelings of belonging at work and supports cooperation.

To ensure employees can successfully work with autonomy, equip them with the tools they need to succeed.

There are several ways leaders can offer employees autonomy, including more schedule flexibility in the form of remote and hybrid work options, more ownership of projects (with more decision-making authority), and increased self-management opportunities.

But make sure you check in regularly to find out what team members need. To help employees tap into the kind of intrinsic motivation that helps them engage and commit to their roles, leaders should delegate, not direct, identify what employees need, and give them the tools to succeed.

To help employees grow, provide them with developmental coaching and opportunities for advancement and development.

Leaders can boost employee motivation when they help their employees chart a career path through developmental coaching, advancement, and professional development opportunities that enable them to build skills, knowledge, and experience in their chosen field.

Leaders should play an active role in facilitating employee growth. Creating a clear path to growth, development, and advancement for employees shows them that you are committed to their success, which keeps them motivated to keep working toward their goals.

When recognizing employee contributions, measure success with impact.

Recognition should always be part of the feedback leaders provide to employees because it meets a core human need for both the employee and the leader, and it can profoundly impact motivation by reinforcing the behaviors that lead to achievement.

To keep employees motivated, celebrate their success. And measure success with impact. Celebrating employee accomplishments and tying those accomplishments to impact helps them see a deeper purpose in their work.

Matt Tenney (https://peoplethriver.com/matt-tenney/) has been working to help organizations develop leaders who improve employee engagement and performance since 2012. He is the author of three leadership books, including the groundbreaking, highly acclaimed book Inspire Greatness: How to Motivate Employees with a Simple, Repeatable, Scalable Process. (https://www.amazon.com/Inspire-Greatness-Motivate-Employees-Repeatable/dp/1637745079?&_encoding=UTF8&tag=thegenerousgr-20&linkCode=ur2&linkId=7bd41fdb901e13d5910d2a38a25b10ba&camp=1789&creative=9325rship-Monastery-Boardroom/dp/1118868463?&_encoding=UTF8&tag=thegenerousgr-20&linkCode=ur2&linkId=d38de2420c38c114b9ee6ac21659bd11&camp=1789&creative=9325)

Matt's ideas have been featured in major media outlets and his clients include numerous national associations and Fortune 500 companies.

He is often invited to deliver keynote speeches at conferences and leadership meetings, and is known for delivering valuable, actionable insights in a way that is memorable and deeply inspiring.

Have questions?