

Team Motivation

by Peter Grazier

Motivation. We hear the term often. Generally we associate the word with human behavior, meaning, a state of mind that moves us to action. And even though few of us have had formal training in it, it's one of those characteristics of life that seems to fit the old adage, "I know it when I see it."

For most of my years working in the field of workplace collaboration, this word has held a place of stature and importance, because it has been, perhaps, the most significant outcome of worker involvement. As the collaboration trend, and more specifically, the use of employee teams continues to grow, one question that is taking on greater importance is how to keep the team motivated over the long haul.

What are the ingredients or characteristics of teams that seem to sustain high levels of motivation?

I posed this question to a group of people recently and found that it tapped into some deeply held beliefs about what makes us do what we do. So for those of you working with teams, here are some thoughts that might help:

What Makes Us Do Anything?

Probably the first question to be answered in a discussion of motivation is "What makes us do anything?" Why am I writing this article? Why are you reading it? Why did you get out of bed today and go to work? Why did you join that volunteer organization last month? Why did you drop out of the other one?

Each day brings with it an endless list of decisions to be made. The process of making those decisions is driven, in large part, by the hope of a benefit or the fear of a consequence.

For example, I truly enjoy coffee and donuts from Dunkin' Donuts. I pay them money for the benefit of enjoying the taste and filling a void in my stomach. However, I limit my intake of these donuts for fear of the consequences of too much sugar and fat in my diet.

Literally, every decision we make is filtered through this process. The industrial psychologists have taken this further by defining these consequences as needs. **Our needs for sustenance, safety, security, belonging, recognition, and a sense of growth and achievement become strong drivers (motivators) of behavior.**

The subject of motivation is, at once, simple and complex. Simple, in that it explains much of what we see happening in human behavior, yet complex when it poses contradictions.

For example, the need to nourish ourselves is strong, and hunger will drive us to extreme actions, particularly in the case of extreme hunger. However, how does one explain a hunger strike? How can you explain the actions of someone who has died because they chose not to eat? The psychologists will say that a higher level need took over....perhaps the need to make a point about an issue that, to the person, was larger than life itself.

So as we attempt to understand motivation, we need to appreciate the subtleties that exist in human behavior, and focus our attention on general principles of motivation that have wider application. At least if we can understand some of these principles, we might be better prepared to lead or facilitate a long-term, highly motivating team experience.

Why Be Part Of A Team?

You've been asked to participate on a team to accomplish some task. Immediately your decision-making process begins.

- What is the purpose of the team?
- Is it a topic that interests me?
- Who will be on the team with me?
- What kind of authority will we have?
- Is it important to management?
- What is the reward for participating?
- What is the risk (perceived as punishment) for not participating?
- How long will it run?
- Will I be better off as a result of my participation?

These are some of the questions we ask ourselves when faced with an invitation to participate in some kind of team. Are they typical questions?...of course. Do they relate to our motivation to participate?... certainly.

Sometimes, however, we are not given the opportunity to refuse participation on a team: for example, a work group or an organization that has restructured itself into self-directed work teams. In these cases, by default, we are part of the group or team.

Nevertheless, in either case, motivation can rise or fall depending on a myriad of factors. Let's look at some of them.

Factors That Influence Team Motivation

I. Purpose

I have asked people for years to describe the characteristics of their most successful and rewarding team experiences. At the top of almost everyone's list is a clear purpose, focus, or mission. But further, for long-term motivation, it must be a purpose or mission that they find aligns with their personal wants and needs.

One can be asked to participate on a temporary task force. If the mission is clear, he might be able to sustain motivation for the duration if he feels it is important. However, if it is a topic that is not in line with his wants and needs, his motivation to continue may diminish.

Many years ago on a construction project, I had assembled a group of electricians to streamline the process of making cable terminations. Since they were all electricians, I thought there would be great interest in working on a process that was frustrating people the way it was designed.

About a month into the group's work, they were having great difficulty maintaining momentum and focus. When I asked them why, they said that some of the electricians were conduit specialists and some were cable tray specialists, and that those not working directly with the cable terminations simply couldn't get interested in the subject. What a lesson for me! **Motivation in this case was lacking because the team's purpose was not in line with some of the**

members' wants and needs.

So one strategy with a lethargic team might be to stop the process, re-visit the team's purpose or mission, and see if there's alignment on it. Even with a team that seems well-motivated, it still is a good strategy to recheck once in a while.

II. Challenge

Another term that I hear frequently when I ask about team motivation is challenge. The human species, as with most animals, has been given a survival mechanism called fight or flight syndrome. When presented with a challenge, our defenses are alerted to move us to action....to run away from danger or address it directly.

Many people will say that their most rewarding team experiences resulted from some sort of challenge. I've heard the stories often of mediocre groups that responded to a challenge with heroic success. **The challenge itself was the motivator.**

In the workplace, these challenges occur infrequently. Teams are not presented with stimulating challenges every day. So the question becomes how to provide challenges to the team at more frequent intervals.

An additional criteria for a challenge is the **level of difficulty**. If a challenge is too difficult, perhaps perceived as impossible, then team members may give up before they start. However, the same result may occur if the members perceive the challenge as too easy. Little energy is required to accomplish something so easily obtained.

So for ongoing teams, periodic stimulation in the form of a worthy challenge is another method of maintaining motivation.

In 1983, I was managing a work group for a large construction organization. It was a long-term project (10 years), and senior management had discussed conducting an open house for the workforce. Management, however, had always nixed the idea--fearing the difficulty of coordinating an event that would encompass seven thousand workers and their families.

My work group heard about the idea, however, and asked to take on this assignment. There was enormous interest in conducting this event within the workforce, so with much support, my group planned and successfully coordinated an open house that ultimately attracted over 10,000 people.

The challenge for my group was enormous....but achievable. The challenge created high levels of motivation while planning the event; and the sense of accomplishment after the event sustained motivation even longer.

I don't suggest by this example, that every work group take on such a formidable task, but simply think about the implications of taking on a new challenge periodically.

III. Camaraderie

Seldom, if ever, in our MBA programs (which purport to be leadership development programs) have we seen courses of study in team development and motivation. That is changing now and will continue to change in the future.

If one studies highly effective groups, one finds that the most successful groups over the long haul tend to address both the technical needs and human needs. These groups are at the same

time competent in the work they perform and highly functional in their interpersonal relationships. The group is well balanced in both technical and human skills.

Another factor that emerges from my queries about successful teams is camaraderie, meaning comradeship, fellowship, and loyalty. The people on these teams genuinely like each other and work hard to develop and maintain their relationships.

Although they are probably not aware that research supports this behavior, they just seem to understand that it's a lot easier to support your team member when you have a good relationship. **The fallout from this kind of relationship building is open and direct communication, frequent praising of each others' contributions, and mutual support.**

So, you will say, that is all well and good for teams whose members like each other, but **what if they don't like each other?**

Much of the time we like or dislike someone, it relates more to how well we understand them. And since our formal training has not addressed this, most of us enter adulthood ill-equipped to deal with the myriad of personalities, temperaments, cultures, values, beliefs, ideologies, religions, and idiosyncratic behaviors of those we meet.

One way to break down these barriers is to **expand one's understanding of his own species**. Training is available to address most of the topics above, and exercises can be beneficial if they move us to another level of understanding.

But don't overlook the simple solutions. Designing an **off-site activity** for the team, sometimes just to play together, is a powerful way of building camaraderie. For more thoughts on this, see our article "[Celebrations and Events to Build the Team](#)".

IV. Responsibility

In general, people and teams are stimulated by being given responsibility. Having ownership of an identifiable block of work is a long-held tenet of motivation in groups.

Responsibility can be tricky, however. Implied in this concept is the understanding that the responsibility comes along with authority to make the necessary changes. Teams that have **both the responsibility and authority** tend to maintain motivation over longer periods of time.

Responsibility can be demotivating if the consequences of error or failure are too great. If the organization, for example, has a history of punishing mistakes, then the giving of responsibility is viewed more as a negative. The short-term performance may be good (remember fear is a motivator), but long-term motivation will suffer. It is difficult to sustain high performance when energy is being sapped by fear.

V. Growth

Finally, personal and team growth can provide another basis for sustained motivation. When people feel they are **moving forward, learning new concepts, adding to their skill base, and stretching their minds**, motivation tends to remain high. Personal growth adds value to the individual, enhancing self-esteem and self-worth.

Accordingly, team members and team leaders should look for opportunities that help add knowledge and skills. A good technique is to simply **ask** members what they would like to get from their association with the team, then **listen** for areas of possible growth.

VI. Leadership

A good leader can be a catalyst for motivation in the short term, but the best leaders create the conditions for the team to motivate itself.

We have all seen examples of how leaders inspired teams to accomplish some phenomenal task. History books and Hollywood are full of these stories, and we come to honor these leaders.

But the charismatic leader that can be so effective in the short term, cannot necessarily sustain motivation indefinitely. Motivation is inherently intrinsic, residing within oneself. Therefore, if one depends continually on another for their source of motivation, eventually it ends.

Great leaders **have a knack for helping others see the best in themselves**, providing the stimulus for self-actualizing behaviors.

But great leaders also **understand the importance of team purpose, challenge, camaraderie, responsibility, and growth, and focus much of their time on creating the conditions for these to exist.**

Great leaders **understand that their team members have needs**, and that for motivation to grow and continue, the activities of the team must help in some way to meet these needs.

Summary

A team whose members are aligned with its purpose, feel a challenge in their task, have a strong sense of camaraderie, feel responsibility for the outcome, and experience growth as a team and in their personal lives, will tend to sustain motivation over the long haul.

This is not to say that they will not have difficulties at times, or that members' wants and needs won't change over time. In these cases, sometimes changes will have to be made. A member who no longer feels the team is meeting his or her needs may have to leave the team to continue on their own path.

But, in as much as it is possible to sustain motivation indefinitely, the factors above will tend to create the best possible environment for it.