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Leveraging an Employee's Motivation

By Ronald M. Foss

Employees who have clear objectives, the required competencies, and a supportive working environment still require a level of desire, willingness and positive thinking to complete tasks in order to optimize performance. This state of willingness could be restated as motivation, the mental game or the internal forces that affect the outcomes, intensity and perseverance of an employee's voluntary behavior.

Managers need to evaluate each employee's motivation, skills and the thinking supporting them due to shifting corporate goals and competitive threats. Given that there is a broad range of individualistic practices within the employee population, it is likely that each employee is motivated in different ways and a good manager or leader, according to my experience, has the responsibility to identify those differences and leverage the individual potential from each and every employee.

In David C. McClelland's theory of learned needs he suggests that achievement, affiliation and power are the important sources of motivation. As he suggests, however, high achievers are self-motivated to high levels of achievement while low achievers require direction and reinforcement from others. He goes on to say that employees can learn to become more achievement oriented but recognizes that there are different types of employees bringing a balance to our social framework.

This is why it is so key that managers understand employees for the individuals that they really are. Daniel Goleman, who has done extensive work in the area of *Emotional Intelligence*, suggests that those employees with potential are motivated by a desire to achieve for the sake of achievement and states further that managers with strong emotional intelligence are themselves self-motivated individuals – These principles should then apply to all employees and managers.

If motivated employees are more willing to exert certain effort over a period of time in order to achieve a goal, then what role does the manager have in his or her interaction with that employee?

It is important for managers to have a grasp of each employee's level of ability and motivation according to Dr. Paul Hersey. He suggests that the ownership of the task between the manager and the employee be shared in accordance to the various possible levels of both ability and readiness. A training company named Gilmore and Associates devised a model that incorporates these notions and I have worked with them to further its usefulness.

It is important that a manager determines what the over all ability of an employee is prior to attempting to teach, share or transfer the key aspects of the tasks to that employee.

The same holds true for motivation but I would suggest that the aspects of motivation are often overlooked by many managers as it is the more difficult of the two to identify and manage. Just as with ability an evaluation of motivation should be considered and then skillfully engage, encourage and recognize the mental game and thinking of each individual employee.



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[I believe that ability is mind to hand while motivation is mind to heart. Think of it this way – Performance equals Ability (Mind to Hand) times Motivation (Mind to Heart) or $SP=A(MH) \times M(MH)$]

Managers often remedy performance issues with more skills training when from my experience more often than not the underlying performance issue is the thinking and motivation of the employee. This generally means the wrong solution for the wrong problem incurring more overhead cost, lost opportunity cost and often a further slippage in the motivation of the employee.

Different levels of the employee's ability will mean a different coaching style on behalf of the manager in order for the task to be completed at the required level of performance. Lower ability will mean more manager involvement and a specific *teaching* style will be necessary. As ability increases so too does the ownership of the task by the employee increase, as he or she will begin to determine what is required in order to complete it. A *sharing* style becomes the most commonly used style by managers during this next phase. As the employee's ability level optimizes the role of the manager shifts more to a *transferring* style. Involvement of the manager is far less and ownership for the task is now primarily that of the employee.

Typically the same holds true for levels of motivation (M) with respect to the same task although the characteristics and processes for engaging it are more emotional than behavioral. It is here that the passion for managing employees comes to the forefront.

Managing an employee with low motivation will require a nurturing manager, one that will *engage* in the values and principles of the employee more so than technical abilities for that task. I believe that emotional factors have to engage the employee's values in order to stimulate the whole employee. As the employee's motivation improves you follow through with *encouragement* reinforcing the positive and helping them see that there is light at the end of the tunnel. At the highest level of motivation you simply *recognize* their capability supporting them to the highest possible level of success.

An employee with high ability and motivation with respect to a specific task is more apt to have higher levels of success with the role of the manager being that of a provider of information or in a position to just delegate and reward with little need for intense interaction.

As a manager's proficiency increases with the use of this model, his or her competency at identifying the issues of ability and motivation will also increase. This will provide the manager with an advantage as he or she mentors and coaches his or her employees for greater results. For the longest time I have used this model intuitively but from time to time I have been known to reference a wallet size cheat sheet that I have carried with me for at least twenty years. A real testimonial to the Gilmore model!



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