

## Creating and Maintaining Motivational Environments

*William Kahn, Ph.D.*

Budgets are getting tighter. Qualified pharmacy managers and staff pharmacists are in shorter supply. Morale is declining. Some people don't show up for work.

Free doughnuts every morning won't solve these problems, suggested Dr. Kahn, who is Associate Professor and Chair of the Organizational Behavior Department, Boston University School of Management. Indeed, there's no quick fix. The answer is to think of staff as human capital and to take the time to invest in them. Such investments create a motivational environment. When people think they matter, they become engaged.

### Performance Management Challenges for a New Generation

Investing in human capital is a form of performance management, but it is an approach that is vastly different from the strategies of a generation ago. A new approach is needed because circumstances have vastly changed. In former generations, most employees stayed with one company for life. Today, that loyalty is no longer there. Today's work force is better educated and more diverse. There is much more movement from one organization to another. As a result, managers often have good people for less time. Their biggest challenges are, How do you hold on to the good people as long as you can? and "How do you work with people who might not stay with you for life?"

### Characteristics of a Motivational Environment

To keep employees engaged, managers must create a motivational work environment. Regardless of the field, such environments have some common characteristics. Among them are the following:

- Opportunities for challenge, growth, and learning. People have a need for mastery. Nothing motivates them more than the sense that they are doing something they have not done before.
- Fair compensation.
- Rewards for initiative and superior performance. Many traditional performance management systems were designed to make everybody feel okay, regardless of the quality of their work. In such an environment, people who do superior work often become discouraged. When their contributions are not rewarded, they feel it's not worthwhile to continue to push for excellence. Those who do continue to perform at a high level, despite the lack of rewards, are exploited by their employers.
- Career development opportunities. Whereas learning is important for *internal* growth, career development opportunities are needed to ensure an employee's *external* growth in terms of salary increases and promotions.
- Meaningful work. People want "their name on the machine." They want to feel part of something larger.
- Autonomy without abandonment. Workers want to know that their manager trusts them and feels they can do the job; however, they want to be assured that they have someone to turn to for support.
- Feedback from supervisors. Workers need an external support that will enable them to alter their course when necessary.
- Buffering from noxious stimuli. Part of the manager's job is to protect staff from anything that distracts them from doing their job.

### Roles of the Leader

None of these characteristics will come as a surprise to most workers. In fact, they seem self-evident. Why then are truly motivational environments so rare? It is, Kahn suggested, because we lack leaders. In a motivational environment, a leader has several roles, all of which are carried out simultaneously. A leader is a

- provider of resources, projects, and opportunities;
- developer of new leaders;
- convener of teams, task forces, and coalitions; and
- system builder.

Most important, a leader is a coach. The role of the coach is to work with others in ways that communicate, in acts large and small, an interest in helping them to develop to their fullest capacities. Coaches facilitate high performance and learning through their interactions with others. Coaching offers managers the opportunity to have the greatest impact in the least amount of time. It is an investment in the institution's greatest asset—its human capital.

### Barriers to Coaching

The concept of coaching is not new to anyone who's ever watched Monday Night Football or even a middle school soccer game. Coaches do their work behind the scenes or along the sidelines, between plays or games. They share strategies, then let the players go out and give it their all.

Coaching in the workplace is quite similar. It is not as widely practiced as it could be for several reasons. One reason is a culture of dependency. Some managers relish being the person with all the

answers. They're reluctant to share power. Making the switch from doing the work yourself to facilitating other people's work can be difficult. What's more, the current work environment offers few reward systems for coaching.

### Incentives to Coaching

Coaching has many advantages for the coach. First, it enables him or her to devote more time to strategic work. Second, it makes the department or unit more productive. When everyone is working to capacity, with managers working as facilitators, the workload is better distributed. A third advantage is that the coach soon begins to derive enormous satisfaction from watching other people grow. Finally, coaching enables the manager to train his or her successor. Should a good opportunity come up to move on, coaches know that people on their staff are ready to assume responsibility.

### The Coaching Stance

The role of the coach is to help others develop the ability to reflect, act, and evaluate. Thus, when an employee approaches the coach with a problem, the coach doesn't offer a solution but instead, says, "What do *you* think would work? Why?" and then, perhaps, after listening, "And how do you think it might work if you . . . ?" Coaches seek every problem as a coaching opportunity. They adopt a supportive but nonintrusive stance, making it clear that the responsibility for getting the job done remains with the worker.

Finally, coaches must follow through on words with actions. Otherwise, they lose credibility and trust.

### At the Heart of Coaching: Feedback

People use many excuses for not providing feedback to others. The issue does not arise only in the coaching situation. We may say we care too much about someone to hurt their feelings or claim that the other individual is too stubborn to change. We may feel that the feedback will not be valued. We may fear that honest feedback will destroy a relationship with someone or, in the case of a manager, even cause the person to leave the job.

These responses, Kahn suggested, are cover stories—things we tell ourselves in order to avoid the need to provide feedback. The reasons for such evasiveness are not hard to understand, because providing feedback is not easy. It can get messy. Nevertheless, you can't be a coach if you are uncomfortable providing feedback or unable to provide it appropriately.

In a motivational environment, managers must provide feedback for one fundamental reason: By not doing so they are essentially saying "I don't think you can learn and grow." In the name of avoiding conflict, they are being disrespectful to their staff. When a manager withholds feedback, the employee gets one message loud and clear: My supervisor has given up on me.

It's helpful to think of feedback as a dialogue rather than a one-way street. Feedback opens the door to a conversation aimed at

## Coaching Strategies

- Decide what abilities need to be developed in others.
- Discover the other person's relevant experiences, perceptions, feelings, and concerns.
- Focus on the other person's aspirations and offer yourself as the means through which he or she can achieve them.
- Provide appropriate feedback.
- Come to a consensus on a few vital issues that need to be addressed.
- Position the other person to take action steps.
- Offer support and encouragement.

exploring a behavior and how it may be modified. Guidelines to follow in a feedback session include the following:

- Describe a concrete or specific behavior that has led to the feedback. Make sure that it is a behavior that can be modified.
- Provide the feedback as soon as possible after the behavior has been observed.
- Provide the feedback orally and in confidence.
- Include your own feelings insofar as they are relevant.
- Be specific about the consequences of the behavior (e.g., When you arrive late at our staff meetings, it makes me feel that...).
- Ask questions that will elicit information that can serve as a basis for joint problem solving.
- During the session and at its end, check to make sure that the other person has understood what you have said (e.g., How do you make sense of what I've been saying?).

### Conclusion

Coaching is inseparable from leadership. Good managers weave it into the fabric of their lives. It involves transforming the way that managers interact with their staff. Instead of being a problem solver, the manager is a facilitator of problem solving. Coaching helps employees grow and learn. Equally important, it tells employees that the manager thinks they're worthwhile.

Are some people uncoachable? Maybe. Even so, good managers don't give up. They don't create a self-fulfilling prophecy. Instead, they create a vision of that person as he or she could be—capable, engaged, and productive—and act on that illusion.