



THE KEY TO MOTIVATING SUBORDINATES: **Stop Trying**



“I just don’t get it. We pay higher bonuses than anyone else in the industry, and go to great lengths to make sure non-financial rewards like social/cultural initiatives and training are top notch. Yet, my subordinates don’t seem to be motivated enough to perform at the highest level,” said Ramli, a senior executive from a multi-national company at one of our recent leadership programmes while describing his challenges relating to employee motivation. “They (the subordinates) seem to do just enough to get the job done, but passion and ownership is totally missing,” he went on to add.

If this sounds familiar, you are not alone. Most managers struggle when it comes to motivating their subordinates. Most try really hard to do whatever they can, and constantly ask themselves what more they can do. And therein lies the problem. Asking yourself what you can do to motivate your employees is a futile question because however hard you try, you cannot motivate anyone. The truth is, like most of us, employees are motivated by their own unique self interest. Unless your actions directly address an employee’s self interest, any motivational

initiatives you attempt are likely to fail. So instead of asking what more can you do to motivate your subordinates, you need to find out how each employee is already motivated, and try your best to address their needs.

But how is it possible for a manager to keep track of so many individual needs? Where should the manager even start? A simple two step approach should help: 1. Find out what they want and 2. Address their needs to the extent possible in the normal course of daily work.

Step 1: Find out what they want

Most employees around the world have three buckets of expectations from the workplace:

- What is my Role
- What is my work Environment like?
- How will I Develop my skills and my career?

While each employee's needs are different, all employees have needs in these three buckets. To some, one bucket may be more important than others, but all have questions in each bucket.

ROLE

In this bucket employees want to know about the nature of their work and how it fits in with their personal purpose. Meaningful work they can relate to on an emotional level, is important to most high performers, and to generation Y in particular. There is no shortage of high paying jobs for such people. They decide based on purpose.

ENVIRONMENT

Here, employees want to know if the work environment is in accordance with their personal values. If meritocracy is important to an employee, she will not thrive in an environment that believes in giving equal bonuses to all.

If autonomy is important to another, he will not excel in a very regimented environment.

DEVELOPMENT

Finally, growing one's skills and career is important to most. People with a high achievement drive want to achieve mastery at something, which can only be done by developing some natural strengths further. Employees want to know if their manager will give them opportunities to convert their strengths into mastery.

So how can managers use RED? The trick is to learn as much as you possible can about each employee's preferences in each bucket. You now have an instant and easy to remember framework to start probing. Start using every opportunity during the course of a normal day or week to ask questions around Role, Environment and Development. Simple questions should help, like How are you doing in your role? What are you most excited about in your job? Tell me about an interesting challenge you are currently working on? Are you having fun? What have you done lately to invest in your own learning and development? What are you working towards in your career? These need not be long conversations. Managers can use 5-10 minutes to get a sense every time the opportunity presents itself.

Start using every opportunity during the course of a normal day or week to ask questions around Role, Environment and Development. How are you doing in your role? What are you most excited about in your job? Tell me about an interesting challenge you are currently working on? Are you having fun? What have you done lately to invest in your own learning and development? What are you working towards in your career?



Step 2: Address their needs

The more you ask, the more you'll understand their needs, and the better you will be able to address them. For example, if someone wants to be challenged more, you can assign them on new or special projects. If someone does not fully understand the big picture context of their role, you can explain it. If someone is unhappy about certain aspects of the environment, you can try and change it. Finally, if you know about your employee's career development interests, you can assign her work that will help them build mastery in their preferred domain. By staffing them on the right

projects, by giving constant coaching and feedback, and by investing in appropriate training, a manager can facilitate the mastery process without spending inordinate amounts of time and money. As the employee begins to develop mastery in the field, her motivation soars. But this would only be possible if the manager knew the employee's strengths and career interests in the first place. Trying to motivate someone in the absence of such information is impossible. So stop trying, and start asking.