A Newsletter from Harvard Business School Publishing

harvard management update

ARTICLE REPRINT NO. U0608C

Motivating Employees to Go Above and Beyond

by Lauren Keller Johnson

Motivating Employees to Go Above and Beyond

Telling employees what to do goes only so far. To get the most out of your workforce, you need to build engagement.

by Lauren Keller Johnson

A SALESPERSON, INSTEAD OF QUITTING AT FIVE O'CLOCK, makes one more call to secure a deal that helps the company achieve its revenue goals for the quarter. An equipment operator stays past the end of his shift to ensure that oncoming workers get off to a quick start. A purchasing manager forgoes plans to have lunch with a friend so she can help a new hire complete an important project on time.

What do these organizational heroes have in common? They have managers who have a talent for engaging employees and motivating them to go above and beyond the call of duty, argue Aubrey Daniels and James Daniels, authors of *Measure of a Leader: An Actionable Formula for Legendary Leadership* (Performance Management Publications, 2005).

As a manager, you know that telling an employee what to do goes only so far. To get the most out of your workforce, you need to build engagement. Engagement, the authors say, is not simply a question of working longer or harder; rather, an engaged employee is one who demonstrates commitment, initiative, and a holistic understanding of the company's needs. Consider the distinction between a worker who stays late to catch up on paperwork and one who stays late to help a panicked colleague package a promised shipment for a key customer just as the UPS van pulls up to the loading dock.

You know you've built an engaged workforce, the authors say, when you see "a critical mass" of employees doing three things: (1) giving more than their job description requires; (2) delivering this extra effort precisely when it's needed; and (3) focusing their "extra mile" on the top-priority actions necessary to carry out your mandate.

The ability to motivate and inspire employees to go the extra mile is rooted in two general practices. First, there has to be clear communication of unit and company goals and expectations. "If you have confusion or delays about where employees should focus their efforts," says James Daniels, "they can't provide what you need from them." Second, managers need to make an informed, deliberate use of positive reinforcement, such as public praise, opportunities to take on new challenges, a note of thanks, or an invitation to mentor another employee. Whatever form the reinforcement takes, managers should use it as quickly as possible after employees demonstrate the desired behaviors.

"Behavior that isn't reinforced gets extinguished," says Aubrey Daniels, the founder of the Atlanta-based consultancy Aubrey Daniels International, where James Daniels also works as a vice president. More specifically, here are their seven steps for generating engagement and initiative in your employees.

1. Identify required new behaviors

What are your company's most pressing challenges? And what actions must your employees take to help surmount those challenges? By answering these questions, you clarify the critical behaviors that you want to reinforce—thus ensuring that employees focus their discretionary efforts on high-priority goals.

For example, is your firm losing key customers to rivals? Then critical behaviors will probably include identifying the reasons for defections and defining new levels of customer service that will most likely appeal to each key account's specific needs and delivering those new levels of service. Does your organization need to ramp up its innovation? If so, critical behaviors may include generating unique, fresh ideas for new products or services; gauging the potential innovations' likelihood of success; and designing product or service features that deliver specific benefits valued by consumers.

2. Communicate required behaviors

Once you've identified the new behaviors needed to address your company's key challenges, communicate those behaviors in crystal-clear language to your direct reports. For example, at one Canadian ferry company that Aubrey consulted to, a new CEO took the helm just as the organization's performance sunk to new lows. The chief executive laid out his agenda for recovery in no uncertain terms, saying, "These are the changes we need to make to run this company successfully. If you disagree, I'll help you find other employment—because you won't be happy here."

"He wasn't being mean," Aubrey says. Instead, he was being extremely clear about new expectations and "demonstrating that he wasn't going to reinforce the old way of doing things."

3. Identify others' preferred reinforcers

Though some positive reinforcers—such as a note of thanks for a job well done or a heartfelt, one-on-one expression of gratitude—have broad appeal, every person has preferred ways of receiving thanks. Say you learn that one of your direct reports spends his spare time repairing and refinishing old cars, indicating a love of technical problems requiring acute attention to detail. Potential reinforcers for this individual, say the authors, might include invitations to contribute his ideas for solving a technical problem. If another employee tells you she spends weekends getting together with friends and volunteering for a local literacy project, possible reinforcers for her may include opportunities to mentor fellow employees. Such assignments would satisfy both the desire to forge social connections and the impulse to help others, as demonstrated by her leisure pursuits.

Day-to-day interactions should also reveal employees' preferred reinforcers. Over time, you can observe what it is you do that elicits desired behaviors from particular employees: personal praise vs. public praise, an invitation to join a new working group vs. an afternoon off, and so on.

4. Leverage peer pressure

Many people find invitations to share success stories positively reinforcing. Aubrey points to one manager at a manufacturing plant who used this technique to good effect. "At every Monday morning staff meeting, this manager asked employees to tell him of someone they knew in their department who had gone the extra mile the previous week on a key organizational priority. People started looking around more energetically for such success stories to share because they wanted to be able to answer the question at the next week's staff meeting." The sharing of success stories also fanned people's desire to deliver such successes themselves—and thus be recognized by their peers and managers.

5. Follow up on your directions

When people know that you'll follow up on the goals you've communicated, they'll be more likely to deliver the behaviors you want. James cites the example of a plant manager at a nuclear power plant: "Every morning, the manager briefed his line managers on the important issues that needed to be addressed by their employees that day, such as an emphasis on safety policies. After lunch, the plant manager walked around the facility and asked employees what they'd been told about key priorities that day." The line managers, aware that their boss would be testing their ability to communicate priorities to direct reports, were motivated to deliver those crucial communications promptly after the morning meetings.

A mid-Atlantic trucking company that Aubrey worked with offers another illustration of the power of following up. The president of the company had told the workforce that most mission, vision, and values statements were just window dressing—unless each employee understood the meaning of the statements and focused his efforts on fulfilling them. This leader traveled to businesses to which his truckers made deliveries. When he saw a company truck at a facility, he approached the driver and asked him if he could recite the company's mission. Most times, drivers proved that they had memorized the mission. The president would then ask the driver, "How are your actions today going to help us achieve that mission?"

"He got them thinking in very concrete terms" about their role in making success happen, Aubrey says.

6. Use intermittent rewards

Behavioral studies have shown that intermittent rewards have a more reinforcing effect than constant rewards. The authors recommend using very frequent (near constant) positive reinforcement when employees first begin delivering desired behaviors, to get them up to speed. As soon as people are steadily giving you their best performance, switch to intermittent reinforcement, or less frequent rewards.

The reason for the change, according to the authors, is that you want your steadily high performers to feel special—and intermittent rewards fit that bill. James likens this notion to the experience of having a treat: "If you ate your favorite ice cream every day, you'd eventually get sick of it. It's far more special if you have it only occasionally." But even more important, he adds, "people internalize intermittent reinforcement." Without constant external rewards, they begin to look more to themselves for motivation. In other words, they supply reinforcement rather than waiting for their supervisor to do so.

7. Help employees relive successes

Although positive reinforcement is often most effective when delivered as soon as possible after an employee demonstrates a desired behavior, you can't always provide that reinforcement immediately. In such cases, the authors recommend building a mental bridge that lets the direct report go back in time and relive the success. To construct that bridge, ask the person, "How did you solve that problem/win that customer back/score that great sale?"

As the person explains what led to the success, he experiences the accomplishment anew. If he's like most people, he will find this experience powerfully reinforcing. ◆

Lauren Keller Johnson is a Massachusetts-based business writer. She can be reached at MUOpinion@hbsp.harvard.edu.