Motivation and employee engagement in the 21st century

Much of what we already know about motivation still holds true, even in today’s turbulent business environment. But nearly half of the managers in a survey by Ashridge Business School feel that organisations and managers still don’t get it right. Fiona Dent, Viki Holton and Jan Rabbetts explain why.

Motivation has been a major managerial issue for decades. Since the second world war many researchers have explored the area – Abraham Maslow, Frederick Herzberg, Douglas MacGregor, Clayton Alderfer and John Hunt to name but a few.

Much of what they found remains applicable and important today. However, there have been changes in both individual and organisational working practices, processes and principles that have an effect upon the needs and views of the 21st Century employee. These include: the focus on work-life balance, virtual working, home workers and the increased focus on formal performance management processes.

During many of our development programmes at Ashridge participants continue to be challenged by the whole area of motivation – both their own and that of their colleagues and subordinates. We were interested to understand more about what individuals need to keep them motivated and engaged and what organisations are currently doing to support the motivation and engagement of their employees.

Part of the “The Ashridge Management Index” focused on employee engagement and motivation. We explored this from two different perspectives:

- Personal motivation – what is it that motivates you at work?
- Organisational motivation – what approaches are organisations adopting to ensure employees are engaged and motivated in the workplace?

The research was done in two stages. First, a questionnaire that was largely quantitative in nature followed by a second survey that was qualitative. On both occasions we selected several respondents to interview in order to pursue the issues in more depth.

During the first survey we suggested a list of key motivators and asked respondents (about 1,400 of them) to rank each element in relation to importance to themselves and also to rank them in terms of how their organisation viewed these as motivators for employees. Table one highlights the major motivators and asked respondents to rank each element in relation to importance to themselves and also to rank them in terms of how their organisation viewed these as motivators for employees.

Table 1: The seven key factors for motivation and engagement

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What Managers Want Ranking</th>
<th>What Organisations Rely On Ranking</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Challenging interesting work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Opportunity to learn continuously and develop skills and knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>A high basic salary</td>
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<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Having the authority to run your own show</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Clear career advancement within the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Knowing my decisions have an impact on the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Performance-related pay/incentive schemes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

It is interesting to note the discrepancies between what managers want and what organisations believe their organisations rely on.

It appears from the survey findings that the relationship between people within the organisation is more important from a motivational perspective than the relationship between the organisation and its people. In these challenging times it is easy to lose sight of the importance of the relational and people aspect of motivation especially when people around you are losing their jobs and you are working in overload mode. [See Case Study, page 33] In addition, many organisations have less scope to employ the traditional means of reward and recognition. We would offer the following practical model to help you assess your own motivation, your organisation’s approach to motivation and how you can help motivate others.

The framework suggests that there are five inter-linked aspects of working life that contribute to motivation:

- The organisation provides the structure and processes – performance management and reward schemes, training, interesting work. However, these systems can become overly relied on and turn into bureaucratic nightmares that begin to demotivate. So structures and processes in themselves are not

During the follow-up research survey (of about 200) was qualitative and involved some of the same people as the first survey as well as new respondents. Table two summarises the key findings.

It is interesting to note the discrepancies between what managers want and what organisations believe their organisations rely on.
Organisations do not motivate people, it’s people in organisations that motivate people

As our research shows, organisations must be clear in terms of vision, communication and decision-making processes. Leaders and managers must earn the respect of others, create an appropriate working environment and provide opportunities for people to grow and develop. This becomes doubly important when times are tough.

It appears the key element in relation to motivation is for the individual to be clear in his or her own mind about what it is that motivates them and how these needs can be satisfied at work. It then rests with the individual to share this information with their boss and relevant colleagues.

The boss provides a crucial role in the motivation process, not only acting as a role model but also valuing each of their colleagues and staff in a way that makes them feel motivated. This means that as a boss you need to take time to understand each person's needs and 'what makes them tick'.

A simple and useful starting point is to engage your employees in a conversation about their motivation. As leadership guru Benjamin Zander suggests, a boss could ask people 'What could make things around here more meaningful for you?' Simple, really, but think about how often something like this is done?

A good starting point will be as follows:

- In addition to the boss colleagues can play a major role in levels of motivation at work. Being with like-minded people can energise and motivate us. Several managers in our survey emphasised this – “I personally get motivated by good feedback from those I work with.”
- Many of us are also motivated by feedback from our customers (both internal and external) and clients. The issue here is, to consider whether this is left to chance or part of organisational processes.

What is this all telling us about motivation? It seems to suggest that motivation is more individually focused in that it is about personal relationships and our own perspective on motivation. Organisations can provide platforms, processes and policies to create a framework but this is only a skeleton.

If you want employee engagement and motivation to be truly first class in your organisation you have to apply the model to assess where you have strengths and weaknesses organisationally. At an individual level you have to take responsibility for yourself and for others around you.