Bringing Out the Best in the People You Manage

Employees who are engaged at work -- who like their jobs and feel motivated to give it their best -- are more productive at work. Research by the Gallup Organization has shown that disengagement is costly: The lower productivity of actively disengaged workers costs U.S. employers about $350 billion a year. On the other hand, dozens of studies have proven that high levels of engagement are linked to retention, better customer service, higher rates of employee commitment, and profitability.

As a manager, you play a big role in your organization’s success, in large part through your influence on how engaged employees are at work. In this article, we will explore five ways to encourage and motivate the people you manage to give it their best.

1. Give positive feedback often.

The number one reason people leave their jobs is because they don’t feel appreciated, according to Tom Rath and Donald O. Clifton in *How Full Is Your Bucket?* Here are two helpful tips from their book:

- “Increase your own awareness of how often your comments are negative.” With each person you manage, work toward a ratio of five positive comments to every one negative one, and even more for strong performers.

- “Shine a light on what is right.” Focus on what employees are doing right rather than where they need improvement.

“Employees with managers who focus on their strengths or positive characteristics are almost 13 times more likely to be engaged,” according to a Gallup poll. Numerous studies have shown that ongoing encouragement and recognition are key drivers of employee engagement. According to Gallup, managers who focused on strengths got much better performance from their teams than managers who focused on weaknesses.

- *Give positive reinforcement right away when someone does a great job.* Don’t wait for the next performance review. Try to say specifically what impressed you. Rather than just, “Great job on that presentation,” add, “Your PowerPoint slides captured it perfectly.”

- *Give positive reinforcement for improvement, not just for excellence.* Look for opportunities to reinforce your employees’ efforts when they’re making improvements, even if they haven’t yet attained the highest possible level of
performance. “People who are making an effort to do things better deserve all the encouragement you can give them,” writes Thomas K. Connellan in his book *Bringing Out the Best in Others!* Encouragement along the way will help people reach their potential.

2. **Support flexibility as much as your business allows.**

   Flexibility is a key factor in employee engagement and job satisfaction. A 2008 Families and Work Institute report, “When Work Works,” found that engagement and job satisfaction are linked strongly with employees having the flexibility they need to successfully manage their work and personal responsibilities. Yet only 50 percent of employees in the U.S. have the flexibility they need to meet their work-life responsibilities, according to the report. The more control you are able to give the people you manage in how they do their work, the more satisfied and effective they are likely to be.

   - **Be supportive of flexible work arrangements as much as possible.** While flexibility may not be possible in all organizations or for all individuals, the more support you are able to provide in this area, the better. That might mean allowing an employee to have schedule flexibility or shift flexibility, or to vary arrival or departure times, for example, in order to meet personal needs. It might mean allowing an employee to work from home one morning or afternoon a week if the job allows.

   - **Demonstrate respect for team members’ lives away from work.** Ask if projects or meetings are creating conflict for anyone. Be willing to work with people to help them resolve issues that may arise when work interferes with personal responsibilities. Build consideration of personal priorities and responsibilities into team and project planning.

   - **Be a role model of work-life integration.** Successful managers work at building a culture that promotes work-life integration because they know that doing so pays off. How flexible are you when it comes to responding to people’s work-life needs? Do your employees feel comfortable taking time off from work to attend to personal matters? Do your employees feel comfortable calling in sick when they are too ill to work?

3. **Create a positive and supportive work environment.**

   Gallup’s research shows that employees perform better for bosses who care about them.

   - **Make connections with people, and help them connect with others in the organization.** Their support for each other and the information they exchange will help people give it their best.
• **Be sure employees have the resources they need to get the job done.** If funds are tight, get creative and advocate on employees’ behalf. People who have unreasonable workloads can have their sense of engagement worn down over time.

• **Use high expectations to encourage success.** Having high expectations doesn’t just mean setting high standards. It means thinking the best of people in your group and expecting them to succeed. Numerous studies in varied situations have shown that when you believe someone will succeed, you tend to give them precisely the encouragement and support that helps them succeed. So prepare your employees for success and usually you’ll get better results.

• **Encourage people to achieve a little more than they have in the past to allow them the good feeling of success.**

• **Create positive relationships with your team members.** You can do this through regularly scheduled one-on-one meetings, through frequent, meaningful, and constructive feedback, and through providing opportunities for growth and flexibility.

• **Help people feel connected to the work and the organization.** Reviewing goals is a productive way to spend your time as a manager. Tie the work to organizational objectives so that employees understand not only their work, but the business as well.

4. **Provide ongoing opportunities for learning and growth.**

“Learning organizations reach deep into the ranks to identify more effective ways of working and provide learning opportunities for employees to develop their skills,” according to the Families and Work Institute report, “When Work Works.”

• **Provide new and ongoing challenges to help people stay motivated and interested in their jobs.** Encourage employees to take advantage of learning opportunities on the job. Provide ample opportunities for participating in special projects and initiatives as well as job shadowing, apprenticeships, mentoring, and other learning situations to help people broaden and expand skills. Encourage people to participate in training, workshops, and online courses. Every employee should have a personal development plan.

• **Encourage employees to come to you with solutions, not just problems.** By encouraging employees to think about and propose solutions, you empower them to feel more in control and more invested in the outcomes of solutions that get put in place. You also build employee problem-solving skills that will lead to smoother workplace functioning over time.

• **Provide opportunities for two-way mentoring.** You may want to ask an employee who is good with technology to mentor a co-worker who has less experience with
computers, or ask an employee with management experience to mentor an employee who is assuming a supervisory role on a project for the first time.

- **Regularly review career goals with employees.** Encourage employees to discuss their goals with you and help them develop a plan to achieve those goals. Ask about their career aspirations so you can identify meaningful learning opportunities. You might ask, “What do you hope to accomplish in the next six months?” “The next year?” Review such topics as projects and assignments, networking, and mentoring.

- **Help people see the big picture.** Research consistently shows that when employees feel connected to the business and understand how their actions can support it, there is less employee turnover and greater productivity. Employees who learn about their organization’s work, services, or products (especially the ones they work on) and about their customers and competition are much more likely to be engaged. Help people align their individual work goals with company goals. Everyone has to believe they are contributing to the bigger picture somehow.

### 5. Offer resources and support to help employees manage stress.

Stress affects energy, performance, retention, and employee engagement. According to research by WFD Consulting, employees with high stress are 15 percent less engaged in and committed to their organizations, and their intention to leave their companies is almost twice as high.

- **Encourage employees to use the resources available to them through work to help manage stress and build resilience.** Remind them to make use of such resources as the employee assistance program (EAP), health and wellness programs available through work or outside of work, and other work-life resources and programs such as trainings and workshops.

- **Encourage employees to use their vacation time.**

- **Encourage employees to take advantage of health screenings and other health initiatives.** The program that provided this publication offers resources on smoking cessation, weight loss, stress management, and other issues affecting employee health, absenteeism, and engagement.

It’s easy to forget to do the many things mentioned here, like giving frequent positive feedback or providing learning opportunities for your employees. Consider writing down an action plan -- specific steps you can take -- to motivate and bring out the best in the people you manage.

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