

THE 3 KEYS TO MOTIVATION

BY MARK BRESLIN



ARE YOU IN CHARGE OF ANYONE? Do you have any responsibility for management objectives, outcomes or profits? Do you have anyone working for or with you who supervises, guides, mentors or leads others? If the answer to any of these questions is yes, then I have a very simple question that should be easy for you to answer: What are the top three performance motivators for people in the workplace?

Can you answer this quickly and accurately? If not, why not?

It is only the most important question one can ask, teach and utilize. But, hey, I'm sure you have the answers correct. For all the other people not quite as on the ball as you, let's take a quick look.

According to national studies of workplace satisfaction, motivation and performance, the three key prime motivators are:

-  **RECOGNITION AND PRAISE**
-  **PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING**
-  **MONEY**

So, let's do a little check in on our industry for these three factors. And why not a little reflection on your organization? And heck, while we're at it, how about your personal leadership and motivation style?

RECOGNITION AND PRAISE

The construction industry is not touchy-feely. Leadership "soft skills" in our industry would best be described as deficient or nonexistent. I know, because I was there too. Our industry is run on authority, ego, pride, attitude, swagger, aggressiveness and competition. And you can build a lot of jobs and make money doing it that way. Conversely, this approach seems to overlook the No. 1 prime motivator entirely. Recognition and praise are given grudgingly, if at all.

I have a glass-encased hand saw on the wall in my office. It was my grandfather's saw, and he was (as was my great-grandfather) a hard-nosed Italian contractor. Inscribed next to the saw is his message of motivation summed up in one quote he used frequently on the jobsite: "Don't drink more water than you can sweat." In other words, don't even think about stopping, even to pee. This summarizes our industry in a nutshell. Field leaders pride themselves on being tough instead of perceptive or interactive. Thus, the vast majority of our industry culture does not maximize the productivity, commitment and profit returns of recognizing individual and team performance. What to do?

1. **Coach field leaders, key lead-men and even apprentices on the necessity of providing positive feedback to subordinates and peers. Reward and recognize this behavior when you see it.**
2. **Note that recognition and praise are only effective when they are tied to a specific event or tangible effort or outcome. General, non-specific praise or recognition has no impact on satisfaction or motivation.**
3. **Be sincere. People can tell when you are doing it with an agenda.**
4. **Build a culture where this is not only centralized around one area (safety/production) but all areas that contribute to the organization's broad mission.**
5. **Do it yourself. Every day.**

PARTICIPATION IN DECISION MAKING

Why even bother with this one when you and I know everything anyway? The real lesson is that people want to feel a part of determining their own fate. Call it "buy in." Call it alignment. Call it brainstorming. Call it a flat management structure. The label matters less than the practice. Hey, our business is generally not a democracy, but it should not be a dictatorship. The net result of people being directed is that they do what they are directed to do. The net result of people doing what they are part of developing is seeing pride and a bigger macro picture of how their small part fits in terms of purpose and meaning. What to do?

1. **Solicit others' opinions even when you think you know the answer.**
2. **Solicit others' views even when you are impatient and listening to them feels frustrating. The respect you are granting is part of what motivates them.**
3. **Tell people why decisions are made. Give them an idea of how a decision contributes to the organizational mission, whether they like it or not. Weak leaders only give people this when news is good or where they can avoid the discomfort of discussing how it effects those down the chain of command.**
4. **Openly review mistakes – others' and your own. Not in a judgmental manner, but in a way that encourages everyone to own his decisions and learn from each other. When this is not present, some people will default to blaming, CYA, or not providing information out of fear or a "don't care" view.**
5. **Participation in decision making is a key to increasing accountability.**



MONEY

When I ask most leaders what motivates people, the first answer I get is money. But money is the default when the first two are not present. In the field in union construction, money is a zero. In fact, it can be a demotivator. In the system we have, the best and worst workers get about the same compensation. Maybe a guy gets over scale, but it does not make him work harder, it just retains him. They live in a culture where “fair” compensation does not always correlate to personal effort. For apprentices this can be a very poisonous environment; they work for years for less money than others who don’t provide value at the high level required by union construction. What net motivational impact do you think that has by the time they become journeymen? What to do?

1. **Recognize that union wages, though they may on the surface seem to be key motivators, are likely not. If everyone gets the same, you need to find other ways of motivating.**
2. **Give foremen, superintendents, trainers, instructors, office managers and everyone else positioned to influence others the resources and flexibility to reward people in non-monetary ways.**
3. **Remember that money is only No. 3 and that if you work at Nos. 1 and 2 hard enough, No. 3 won’t be such a challenge.**

Lastly, think about your personal style related to these simple but powerful motivational elements. I used to be an unpleasant person to work for. Results before people. Just give me the bottom line. Fifteen years ago, a departing employee told me that in her three years of employment, it was never enjoyable working for me. I was surprised and a little blindsided. The organization was thriving

and growing, increasing resources and by every measure doing very well. But I had used a hard-edged, construction, kick-butt-and-take-names, old-school model that drove people rather than motivated them. It had also about lived out its usefulness, as it wears people out quickly.

It took me a while to figure out, but right there, under my nose, was the real key to motivational success. From that point forward, I began a motivational culture change, and I knew it had to start with me. The long-term results? Transformational growth and success for the organization, and hopefully greater fulfillment for the people who shared in the achievement. And it was so damn simple as to be easy to miss. Involving and recognizing others, developing a more balanced leadership style and considering the true power of the keys to motivation. ■



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