



The Helm Report: Tools, Tips, & Techniques for Avoiding Hiring Mistakes and Developing People

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This Month:

How to Motivate Professionals: The Three "R"s

Motivation Has A Long History

Motivating other people to do what you want them to do has been a major challenge throughout recorded history -- in fact, it's a problem that is as old as human nature. It may be tempting to assume that the ancients, with absolute power over their subordinates, had it easier, but we know that's not the case from ancient Rome's extreme solution to the problem. The legend is that if a Roman Legion did not do well on the battlefield they lined up the soldiers and executed every tenth man! (This is where we get the word "decimate.")

Decimation is an extreme example of negative motivation, about which I'll have more to say later. It's enough to say here that decimation has enormous downsides. Understating the case, it is hard on morale, and drastically reduces your work force! So, let's start by looking at what we mean by motivation, and how can we use motivation in a positive and practical way, to challenge and inspire professionals.

Motivation Defined

In the most general sense, motivation refers to internal and external factors that stimulate the energy and effort in a person to do a job and to exert persistent effort in attaining a goal. *How to do*

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so is the million dollar question, Many different strategies for motivating employees have been tested and evaluated in social science laboratories and in the field in terms of their effectiveness. What we need to ask is how do we use what we know about motivation in terms of managing and supervising professionals? How does motivating professionals differ from motivating other types of employees? What kinds of motivators work best with supervisors?

It is not my intention to take a tour through all the theories and literature about motivation, but I think that a few general observations will be helpful. First, it is useful to keep in mind that, very broadly speaking, motivators can be divided into one of two different types: positive and negative. Negative motivators, again speaking as generally as possible, are those that impose or create a negative consequence for undesirable behavior or actions. Negative motivation works well when there is an urgent need to stop dangerous or undesirable behavior quickly, and it likely works best in extremely limited doses. It always works best if it is used without anger, recrimination, and other negative emotional content.

Positive motivation encourages desirable behavior by rewarding it. It is useful because it can be used to *shape behavior* by rewarding incremental changes in behavior that are tending in the direction of the desired long term change. Positive motivation usually consists of rewards, encouragement, deserved praise, constructive suggestions, and positive attention in general. It is the kind of motivator that leads to long-term change in attitudes and behavior.

Motivating Professionals

Professionals, as a group, are better educated than general employees. By inclination, experience and training, they tend to be independent problem solvers. The basic motivational standbys (money, promotions, bonuses) work up to a point, but we are looking for something more. We want the professionals whom we supervise to have something more than an essentially good work ethic. We want them to be proactive at anticipating problems, to take the initiative when opportunities appear, and to constantly seek to find better ways to do the things required by the job. How do we motivate them to do so or, more correctly, how do we create an environment that facilitates and promotes a culture of encouragement and reward for motivated behavior? I believe that there are three key elements that are essential for motivating professionals. I call them, "The Three 'R's of Motivation for Professionals."

The Three "R"s of Motivation for Professionals

These are basic strategies and, once revealed, they will seem obvious. However, beware of assuming that just because these strategies look like "common sense" that they are always practiced. Being familiar with these strategies and using them are two different things. That said, the three "R"s for motivating professionals are:

Recognize the effort;

Reward the success;

Reinforce the improvement.

Let's look at each one in detail.

Recognize the Effort

Recognize the efforts that a person makes, whether large or small. Professionals are not immune from wanting recognition for their efforts, whether they are successful in the moment or not. This is not as simple as it might seem at first glance. For one thing, it requires time -- that precious commodity -- to pay attention to the daily actions that another person is making that end up producing big results. It is essential that the recognition match the scope of the activity, the effort, in order for it to be believable. It is also essential that it be timely -- that is, immediate. The power

to motivate with recognition drops off rapidly and dramatically with the passage of time.

Let me give you an example from many years ago, in my own business. I had an administrative assistant who was extremely capable, bright, and self-motivated. She was particularly good at anticipating the demands that a project would place on our work flow, and being prepared for those demands. One Friday afternoon, as the deadline for a project loomed, I had her helping me prepare the documentation for a presentation, and we kept making changes on the documents. She worked late that day to make sure that everything was done and even made several important improvements as she worked. Later, as I was leaving the office, and without thinking about it very much, I impulsively stuck a post-it note on her telephone, thanking her for the extra effort she had made that day.

She never said anything to me about the note, and I forgot about it. Several months later, after hours, I happened to sit down at her desk to take a telephone call and glanced, as I talked, at a small bulletin board near her desk where she kept a calendar and some family photos. And there was my post-it note.

How does recognizing a professional's efforts, even the small ones, motivate him or her? While most professionals work in teams or in collegial efforts, they nevertheless end up doing a lot of work alone. Much of this work -- this effort -- goes unnoticed. Yet the professional is always aware, at some level, of the amount of time, effort, or awareness that is devoted to the unseen portions of their work. Having someone recognize that effort can fill an otherwise empty, and usually unconscious, need.

Recognize the effort -- right away, with sincerity, and in proportion to the action or effort.

Reward the Success

Reward both the small and the large successes. There is an old saying, "In life, the small victories are sometimes the sweetest." If you wait to reward only the individual's large and showy successes, it might end up being a long dry spell between rewards for that individual. Look instead for the successes that, however seemingly insignificant, may be meaningful to that person. For example, if you know that one of your team members has particular difficulty keeping others up to date about a project's status, and that person *improves to some degree at doing so*, let him know that you notice the effort he made (Recognize!) and reward him in a form that will have meaning to him. Don't make the mistake of assuming that what may look like an insignificant success to you will look like an insignificant success to him.

An excellent example of improvising an immediate reward was given by a senior manager at a large, high tech company. His department had been struggling for weeks with a particular problem that was holding up progress on an important project. One day, as he sat eating his lunch at his desk (a peanut butter sandwich and a banana), a subordinate burst into his office and breathlessly announced that he had discovered the solution to the problem his group had been struggling with. Knowing the importance of an immediate reward, and having nothing else at hand, the manager grabbed his banana and handing it to his subordinate said, "Here, job well done!" From this developed what came to be known as the "Banana Pin Award". They had small, banana shaped lapel pins made up and rewarded innovative solutions with them. It became a matter of some prestige to be able to wear a Banana lapel pin.

How does rewarding a professional's successes, even the small ones, motivate him or her? Many times small successes are more meaningful even than large ones that don't happen very often. If you can find those small successes for a coworker and reward them in a timely manner, even if it just with a kind word, you strengthen both your rapport with that person and, in his or her eyes, your stature as a competent and insightful person.

Reward the success -- in proportion to the effort and in a timely manner.

Reinforce the Improvement

Reinforce the improvements that you see. Nothing is so discouraging, or more counterproductive

to the intention of motivating professionals, than to be told that improvements need to be made in a specific area of one's performance, only to have one's efforts to make those improvements turn out to be invisible. When your team member makes an effort to improve, reinforce it with good words and, if it is opportune to do so, help the person understand how his particular efforts helped produce a positive result. Getting that reinforcement in the form of understanding what he did that worked will make it easier, and more likely, for the person to repeat the functional behavior in the future. Focus on the *process* by which the person got a better result, not on the specifics of the situation itself.

Focusing on the process can be a challenge and I have a client that found a way to do it with regard to meetings. Meetings have an unfortunately justified reputation as time wasters. It is too easy to get off topic, or have one person hog the floor or leave someone feeling left out. This client developed a process they call a "Plus Delta", short for "positive change." At the end of every meeting they announce "end of the meeting" and then Plus Delta. The Plus Delta is a discussion that focuses on the process of the meeting, not on the meeting's subject matter. How well did the meeting accomplish what it was intended to accomplish? Did everyone participate? Did anyone feel left out? How could the meeting have been made more effective? What can we do at the next meeting to make it more effective? The impact of this focus on the process of the meeting yields improvement in the effectiveness of future meetings effectiveness, in both the short term and in the long term.

How does reinforcing a professional's strengths and helping him strengthen weak areas motivate him? We're all human, and we all have shortcomings as well as strengths. It's harder to be aware of our own shortcomings, though, and that's as true of professionals as it is of anyone else. Most professionals want feedback about how they are doing, and they want that feedback to be offered in a constructive way. On the other hand, if the feedback comes across as criticism, it's likely to be tuned out. Constructive feedback is motivating; criticism is not.

Reinforce the improvement that others make by providing feedback that is process-oriented and that is seen as constructive. Strive to help the professional enhance his strengths and strengthen his weak areas.

Process, Not Project

Recognize efforts, reward successes, and reinforce improvement: these are processes, not projects. These three key strategies for motivating professionals are not something that can be done once, ticked off the list, and then it's back to business as usual. Creating a culture of motivation is a mind-set first, implemented with patience, persistence, and good intentions. Does this mean that you've got to find some reason to compliment every team member every day? Not at all; in fact, insincere compliments or rote "attaboys" usually have the opposite effect. An annual awards meeting can't be all that you do; it feels great to the few who earn top awards, but it also creates a greater number of people who didn't "make it."

Creating a culture that fosters the motivation of the professionals with whom you work requires you to pay attention, notice efforts and achievement, respond right away, and respond appropriately. It usually works best if it starts at the top, but it can start with any single individual, anywhere in the organization. Full implementation will happen one person at a time, because we each learn and accept new ideas at different rates.

That reminds of me of a joke: "Question: how many shrinks does it take to change a light bulb? Answer: Just one, but the light bulb has to *want* to change." Broadly speaking, whenever an organization undertakes an effort to make a "cultural" change, there are going to be three groups of light bulbs: the roughly 15% who are ripe for the change and who light up and burn brightly immediately, the roughly 12-5% who may already be burned out, and then -- the majority -- the 70% or so who will require more time to adjust. They can be turned on to "bright" but it will take time and effort.

Speaking of effort, it's not enough to say, "This is a great idea! Let's all do better at recognizing,

rewarding, and reinforcing," and then expect great results. Awareness and acceptance that implementing these strategies will involve a change in a company's culture is the first step, but that change must be planned. People will have to learn *how* to use the new tools. This should include, among other things, an on-going formal training program supported by an internal "task force of coaches" approach. Individual training is critical for long term success.

The Bottom Line

The bottom line answers the question: why should we be concerned about motivating the professionals who make up our work teams? The answer is because it's the culmination of the efforts of these professionals that produces the company's successes. The more smoothly professionals work together, the more they help one another be effective and productive, the better the outcome for all. The success of a management development and professional growth effort, is built on finding ways to institutionalize the three "R"s of Professional Motivation.

Caveat

Without commitment to recognizing the efforts, rewarding the successes, and reinforcing the improvements of all professionals, even the most elegantly designed Performance Development Program will tend, over time, to become a hollow exercise in bureaucratic form completion instead of a force for company and individual growth. Patience and a persistent effort are necessary for long term success.

Remember, People are *not* your most important asset,

The *RIGHT* People are!

To Hire the Best, Test!

To Reveal Management Potential, Test!

To Diagnose Problem Behavior, Test!

Until next time, all the best,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Kurt". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

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