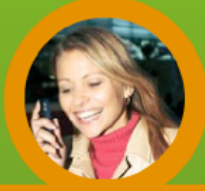


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## HR Zone *Feature*

### Cost-effective ways of motivating your workforce

We all want an engaged and motivated workforce. And we all want to ensure strategies are applied in the most cost-effective way possible. Here, James Brook shows you how.



In the current uncertain economic environment, no concept is arguably more important than motivation. How can companies keep employees motivated while keeping salary, wage and other costs down? How can they ensure employees exert higher levels of voluntary effort, over and above the minimum required, to fight off the competition and ensure consistent financial performance and sustainable growth in tougher market conditions?

Motivation is the reason why people engage in particular behaviour and perform tasks. People are motivated for a variety of different reasons, including more tangible ones such as money and company perks to more intangible aspects such as beliefs, values and ideals people hold.

***"In the current uncertain economic environment, no concept is arguably more important than motivation."***

The intention of most organisations today is to ensure that employee motivation is not only strong, but also consistently applied in the direction of the organisation's goals and values. The aim of most organisations is to raise the level of voluntary or discretionary effort employees are willing to apply beyond minimum acceptable levels. It is this 'over and above the norm' effort that gives organisations a strong people advantage and ensures strong, sustainable results.

However, most organisations fall short of this 'gold standard' and are unable to motivate their employees effectively. A common problem is that organisations often use a very basic 'carrot and stick' approach. This assumes that people need to be encouraged with financial and non-financial rewards to perform better.

In our experience, the emphasis with this type of motivation is very much on pay and benefits, whilst the far less expensive option of offering recognition and praise for a job well done play 'second fiddle' and are in many instances noticeably absent.

The other side of the 'carrot and stick' prescription is that poor performers should be motivated by applying negative sanctions. These may be in the form of overt sanctions such as formal warning letters or withholding promotion, or more subtle punishment such as exclusion from important projects/tasks or decision-making bodies.

#### **It's not a 'one size fits all'**

However, this approach is both oversimplified and misguided, as the underlying assumption is fundamentally flawed – that employees are all motivated in the same way. This leads organisations to approach employee motivation in a 'one size fits all' manner, treating all employees similarly and rolling out highly prescriptive, standardised solutions that may appeal to some employees, but generally fall short of the overriding purpose – to engage all, or at least the vast majority of, employees. This leads to a waste of resources (including money) and disappointing business results.

All these approaches fail to take account of the most critical aspect of employee motivation – the importance of the employees' subjective and unique experience of motivation and the role his/her underlying strengths play in freeing up positive energy and discretionary effort.

Our experience suggests that rather than seeking quick-fix, generic solutions to motivation, the starting point should be to understand employees' unique strengths. We define strengths as "underlying qualities that energise us, contribute to our personal growth and lead to peak performance" (Brook and Brewerton, 2006). By helping employees explore and understand how their strengths can be more productively deployed, organisations will be building a strong, sustainable and cost-effective basis for employee motivation and performance excellence.

Experience with a growing number of clients such as Aviva/Norwich Union, Panasonic, Orange, Foster Wheeler and the Royal Institute of Chartered Surveyors suggests that focusing on individual and team strengths helps unlock and focus energy and effort. Individuals start seeing old problems and performance blockers in a new, confidence-enhancing light – through a strengths 'lens'.

Strengths also help bridge the traditional gap in the psychological (implicit) contract between the company and their employees' expectations. The company's expectation for strong, consistent levels of engagement and performance are met, whilst employees feel energised, challenged and appreciated. And all at very low cost to the organisation.

#### **Top tips at a low cost**

So what can organisations do to ensure they build a highly motivated workforce focused on their strengths? Here are some practical, low cost ideas we have seen work in client organisations:

1. Help employees build awareness of their unique strengths by enabling them to undertake a strengths assessment tool.
2. Find opportunities for employees to apply their strengths at work as frequently and productively as possible. If no scope exists within their current role to fully utilise their strengths, explore 'stretch' opportunities beyond their existing job, such as project work or specific assignments.

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3. Invest in releasing strengths potential among employees through training and development focused on individual strengths rather than weaknesses or personality 'gaps' that are unlikely to change.
4. Ensure employees understand the impact of strengths in overdrive. Our experience suggests that it is often the unintended consequences of overplayed strengths rather than weaknesses that result in underperformance and derailed careers.
5. Create an enabling environment which encourages employees to be different and play to their strengths and ensures blockers to strengths use are removed or minimised as quickly as possible.
6. Offer plenty of positive encouragement including praise and recognition for effort as well as results. This will help build the confidence of employees and create a virtuous performance cycle as more positive, energised employees as more productive employees.
7. Build and develop teams with complementary and relevant strengths for the task in hand. Teams that play to members' strengths not only perform better, but are also more fulfilled, flexible and resilient.

Of course, all this requires a much closer, more appreciative and empathic relationship between the line manager and employee than we often see in organisations. It requires line managers to view employees as individuals with unique capabilities and strengths to be nurtured and encouraged, rather than as 'resources' to be directed towards achieving tasks.

If organisations can create an environment where these relationships flourish and become the norm, they will be well on their way to creating highly motivated individuals and teams. They will be unleashing the full power of their workforce and capitalising on the powerful multiplier effect of positive energy.

This will provide a strong competitive advantage, cost efficiencies and ensure healthy organisational performance in spite of negative market conditions.

*James Brook is co-founder of the [Strengths Partnership](#). He has over 15 years experience in leadership development, talent management and innovative assessment approaches.*

HR Zone, 22-May-2008

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**Peter Hunter , 22 May 2008 @ 13:53 PM**

**Motivating our people is not something that we should be doing.**



**Peter Hunter**

There are very few unmotivated people on this planet and to assume that they are unmotivated and just need us to understand them is not very helpful.

The workforce is full of motivated people who deal with employment, social, financial and personnel issues every day of their lives, when they are not at work.

At work these motivated, energetic and intelligent people are treated as if they had no opinion to give and are never consulted about any aspect of their working life unless it is to answer the question, why didn't you do what you

were told.

These highly motivated people, when they come to work, are subjected to the directive and controlling behaviour of their managers and it is this behaviour that demotivates them.

Instead of pretending that the people who are demotivating the workforce, the managers, have it in their power to remotivate the workforce, we need to acknowledge the damage that their management behaviour is causing.

When we do that we can stop wasting our time chasing illusory motivation techniques and instead just stop behaving in a way that demotivates them.

The workforce are already motivated, the managers just need to understand what it is they are doing that demotivates them.

Peter A Hunter.

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