

Hidden treasures

Five things a leader needs to know about motivation



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As recent experience has shown, money alone is not enough to make executives and employees feel that their work is either truly rewarding or fairly rewarded. As the focus on cash falters, attention has returned to exploration of the psychological factors that make people tick, and analysis of how companies can identify and respond to these motives.

KEEPING EXECUTIVES engaged with their firms has become a hot topic recently. With many forms of compensation reduced, eliminated, or otherwise constrained, how do you keep the best people? This question isn't really about compensation – it's about motivation.

Managers – and management consultants – talk about motivation all the time, but the real needs at seniormost levels are rarely discussed. The requirement for emotional engagement and energy doesn't disappear just because you are “at the top of the house.” The eminent psychologist and businessman David McClelland identified the key issues years ago; the challenge is to identify how they play out at executive levels. There are five key things top leaders need to know – for motivating their people and themselves:

1. Executives require energy – it's hard work
2. You can't create motivation, you have to tap it
3. There are two critical business motives – drive for improvement and drive for influence – and you can't always judge which is driving performance
4. Different jobs play better against different personalities
5. Personality dictates different approaches to incentives and feedback.

Executives require energy

Top executive roles are extremely demanding. Senior people often work more than ten hours a day, seven days a week, travel across every time zone, and even play as



hard as they work. You can't "make yourself" be a CEO the way you "make yourself" take out the trash. It requires massive amounts of what McClelland and his colleagues called *implicit motivation*, defined as non-conscious, emotional drives that energize you around things you like.

In other words, you have to love what you do, because you'll be doing a lot of it! Yet people think that *being* a top executive is energizing enough, despite the high rates of burnout. Contrary to popular belief, money is not a primary motivator – it is at best the way people keep score, or buy things to satisfy their fundamental motives.

You can't create motivation

So how do you put motivation in yourself or others? You don't. Research shows implicit motives are remarkably stable – one study found they changed only insignificantly over twenty years. Motives can be developed – but only slowly, and rarely enough to close a big gap. Fortunately, the process of moving up the ranks in business screens out those with low levels of motivation – they just can't keep up.

The real task of the leader is not to pump motivation into a person, but instead to find what "turns on" their employees, and tap into it, using the person's own, renewable source of energy. Put simply: People get energized to do things they enjoy and that provide emotional satisfaction. You do what you like doing. If leaders can determine exactly what makes people tick – themselves included – they can work to harness that force.

There are two critical business motives

Fortunately for something so important, there's a short list. While academics have debated the number since Henry Murray identified the first twenty in 1938, just two motives make the biggest difference for top leaders, and everyone has both – to different degrees. One is the drive for efficiency and improvement (known by the inaccurate name of "Achievement motive"), being energized and excited by meeting and beating goals or by improving the way things are done. This relates to individual work, innovation, and looking for the new.

The second is the drive to influence and have an impact on others (known by the equally misleading name of "Power motive"). People driven by this desire to influence find emotional satisfaction in knowing others have responded to them, that they have a visible impact

on others. Top leaders are typically driven primarily by one or the other, though both may be present. The exact balance has a big impact on what keeps a person engaged, energized, and enjoying their role – depending on the role itself. There is also a third, highly common, motive about wanting to get along with others and belong, but while this can bond groups together, it often blocks managers, who need to make decisions regardless of personal feelings about individuals.

Different jobs play better against different personalities

One of the most common mistakes is "promoting" someone from a job they love to one they hate, in the process extinguishing job motivation and engagement with the firm that is trying to reward them. A typical example is when experts are forced into influencer roles, which naturally they don't like. Experts like being experts – that's how they climb the ladder.

Leading experts or *communicating* with experts are completely different skills from *being* an expert, and lead to different forms of satisfaction. But most companies promote top sales people or top experts into leadership roles, and then are baffled when people see this as a punishment rather than a reward, and leave to find satisfaction elsewhere. Mitch Kapor, who created Lotus 1-2-3, was self-aware enough to deliberately leave the CEO role to become an innovator and entrepreneur. Note that motives are not conscious, which means people typically make choices based on their conscious decision-making process, which bears no relation to what is fun, nor to what individuals find emotionally rewarding.

The reverse can also occur: People drifting into roles that seem natural and logical cross a motivational line, thus moving into the *right* role for their motives. When they find a role that satisfies their motives, they are happier and learn better, because the role itself feels good. Dave Walden, one of the true creators of the Internet – he co-created packet transfer protocol, which made it all possible – was to all appearances an achievement-motivated software engineer, but ultimately chose to become a senior VP, writer, and executive educator, all roles associated with the motive to influence. His values were around efficiency and innovation, but he clearly enjoyed influence and impact, despite significant introversion.

To place people well, you must understand the motives of the individual, even – or especially – if that

person does not! Then you must understand how a given role appeals to a given motive to connect them up. To understand a person, the simplest way is to observe what kinds of activities get them excited. Remember these are *emotional* drives. Things you do because you feel impelled or obligated are not emotionally engaging. Fun things, or things that you can't let go, reveal underlying motivation. In fact, one of the best clues is something that a person does but cannot explain, because the true motivation is not consciously understood.

Make the rewards match the individuals

Again contrary to popular belief, feedback – like pay – cannot be done in a monolithic manner: If it doesn't suit the person, it may actually punish rather than reward. Those high in the drive to improve, love being given technical challenges and process problems to resolve; those more interested in influencing people want to resolve people problems instead. Indeed, an introvert with a strong Achievement motive may be actively repulsed by an employee recognition program that puts them on display in front of a crowd of coworkers, for example.

Often the person determining incentives will rely on a personal “gut” feel to make the decision, selecting a reward that feels good to them, not to the person being rewarded. This works no better at the workplace than it does for a birthday gift.

There is simply no substitute for intelligent, thoughtful management, consciously taking into account the specific drives and “hot buttons” of individuals, determined by looking at what those people individually want. To complicate matters, what people consciously *value* will filter the forms of emotional satisfaction they find acceptable. Some people satisfy their Influence motive by buying flashy sports cars, but someone with a commitment to being “green” would find such cars unacceptable. The desire to influence can drive ostentatious displays or coaching behind the scenes, because both relate to influencing people and knowing your impact, but in different ways.

Motives *alone* are too simple, but because they are so radically different from each other, knowing them is an essential beginning. It is a simple principle, difficult in practice: To reward people, you must know what they find rewarding! And this combines both their emotional drives and their values around what is acceptable.

To keep someone on the job and fully engaged without money, it turns out many things have broad usefulness. One can develop an array of incentives and let people pick their own – making sure to have a wide enough range that everyone will like something – and it doesn't hurt to ask, either. But at least one general reward appeals to all motives – Achievement, Power, and even Affiliation: individualized, customized coaching and mentoring. A skilled coach appeals to all the motives: helping the improvement-oriented get better, and providing respect and recognition to the influence-oriented.

If you are alert to just these two motives and how some roles use them differently, you can make an enormous difference in identifying and motivating top leadership – not because you put motivation in, but because you can unleash what they already have – or they would not be considered for leadership in the first place. Applying this to rewards means people will continue to do the right job, and love both the process and the rewards they get for doing it. Why shouldn't people love what they do? That's where they get the energy for doing it.

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