

Motivation vs. Empowerment: Knowing the difference can increase productivity

by Dr. Larry Craft

Please allow me the opportunity to reduce the complexity of motivational theory to two words, *Motivation* and *Empowerment* and provide practical ways to use these powerful words to increase productivity, either personally or within your organization. But before we begin, it's good to begin with a little history that helps to separate the two terms.

Abraham Maslow. Any discussion of motivation would be incomplete without including Abraham Maslow's research on the satisfaction of needs. In studying the behavior of primates, he found that needs were satisfied in a particular order, beginning with the most basic (deficit) needs and preceding to the more complex (being) needs. Simply put, individuals have very little interest in the higher-level being needs if the deficit needs are not completely satisfied.

Frederick Herzberg. Herzberg, noted motivational theorist, has repeatedly cross-validated his original research that studied 200 engineers and accountants in the Pittsburgh area. He confirmed that employees were only marginally motivated by certain hygiene needs such as supervision, relationships, working conditions, and salary. However, they acted as significant demotivators if the employees' needs were not met. He found that other human needs such as achievement, recognition, growth, advancement, and interest in the job internally motivated employees.

By integrating Herzberg's and Maslow's theories of motivation, we are able to make a distinction between motivation and empowerment and apply it to the workplace to improve productivity.

Motivation is the process of satisfying your employees' most basic needs (salary, job security, working conditions, and belonging) by removing the negatives that demotivate them. Only when these basic needs are satisfied can you focus on increasing your employees' motivation (empowering your employees).

Empowerment is the process of satisfying your employees' higher level needs (mastery, recognition, advancement, and achievement) by enriching the job in ways that help your employees grow in confidence and competence.

Simply put, motivation is removing their obstacles, and empowerment is increasing their expectancy of success.

Dilbert cartoonist, Scott Adams said, "... you can't motivate people to do things, you can only demotivate them," but this only applies to your employees' most basic needs. The relevant needs that can demotivate your employees and reduce their productivity are the needs for:

1. *job security*
2. *fair pay*
3. *satisfying work conditions*
4. *belonging*

The Need for Job Security. One goal as a leader is to reduce your employees' fear and stress that they may lose their job without warning. If profits are declining and lay-offs are inevitable, communicate with them as a team and let them know your concerns. At the same time, let them know your solutions and expectations. Otherwise, you'll discover that the omnipresent grapevine has done all the communicating for you, and your employees will lose their motivation, making things worse. If an individual employee is not living up to your expectations, avoid idle threats. Use progressive discipline that begins with a verbal warning, followed by a detailed written warning, and then a final action statement that spells out the consequences if the behavior doesn't change. Through the use of formal systems, your employees will know where they stand at all times regarding their job security. As a result, demotivation will not be a problem when it comes to their need for job security.

The Need for Fair Pay. Make sure your employees are paid what they are worth and worth what they are paid. If that is not the case, money becomes a demotivator that negatively impacts their productivity. When employees feel they are paid fairly, money itself is no longer a motivator. Your use of formal compensation systems that are equitable and predictable will reduce the frustration that leads to demotivation. Join your industry association and participate in their compensation surveys. Use that objective information to develop a structured compensation program for each position within your organization that is consistent with your industry norms and cost of living within your community.

The Need for Satisfying Work Conditions. Work conditions can also demotivate your employees. Instead of focusing on the completion of their job duties, employees are distracted or frustrated by problems in the workplace. These problems can include safety, cleanliness, and inefficiency. When it comes to this category of demotivators, you'll most likely be the last one to learn about their dissatisfaction. If something isn't done to regularly monitor these areas, you'll never know if their loss of productivity is due to the economy, the leadership, the management, or their working conditions. There is a solution and it's easy and inexpensive to implement. When each employee is hired, have them agree in writing to complete a Web-based attitude survey every 90 days. As a result, you'll be able to consistently monitor their job satisfaction as it relates to working conditions and other factors. When you discover what is demotivating your employees, act upon it immediately. Remember that exit interviews are too little, too late. Employees quit their jobs emotionally long before they physically walk out the door.

The Need to Belong. No matter what your employees' motivation may be, one thing is for certain: they all want to feel significant. To this end, the most highly successful leaders create a culture that thwarts those feelings of isolation that demotivate employees. Open communication and teamwork are two of the most powerful

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contributors that produce feelings of significance and belonging. When you meet with your managers, ask yourself, “How would my employees feel if they were sitting in this room listening to our conversations?” Your answer to the question will define your culture as either open or closed. Though confidentiality is, at times, appropriate, it should be minimal and restricted to personal and financial information only. To minimize feelings of isolation, maximize opportunities that encourage teamwork. Before you make your next major decision, discuss it with your staff and sincerely listen to their opinions. If you want to avoid those demotivators that reduce employee productivity, develop a culture that satisfies your employees’ most basic needs for job security, fair pay, satisfying work conditions, and belonging.

Now that you’ve satisfied your employees’ basic needs by eliminating their roadblocks or “demotivators,” you’re in the position to increase their confidence and competency (horsepower) and empower them to higher levels of productivity. All of these needs, when satisfied, can significantly increase your employees’ expectancy of success and productivity. The four needs that relate specifically to empowerment include the needs for:

1. mastery
2. advancement
3. recognition
4. achievement

The Need for Mastery. Too often, companies fail to understand the importance of training and competency to feelings of self-worth and expectancy of success. Decades ago, psychologists recognized a relationship between productivity and internal as opposed to external locus of control. Individuals (externals) who believe that chance and circumstance are responsible for their success are less productive than those who feel their actions and effort determine their success (internals). You can significantly increase expectations of success and individual’s internal locus of control through training that allows them to master each day’s challenges. Here is another place where consistently administered attitude surveys and 360-degree feedback can let you know if you have a problem. Ask your employees how they feel about their training and their expectations. You’ll know their need for mastery is satisfied when your employees respond to the survey questions in a way that openly expresses their pride in their ability, their work, and their profession.

The Need for Advancement. You can also empower your employees by providing opportunities for advancement within your organization. Whether or not employees make the change or take the opportunity for advancement, they must believe there are opportunities ahead of them to be empowered to the highest levels of performance. Some managers fail to provide opportunities for learning or advancement because they fear they may be empowering their employees to find another job. That somehow, by increasing their competency, they are building their employees’ résumé and making them more marketable. This type of thinking keeps them a manager and never a leader. Empower your employees by providing workshops and seminars, educational grants for job related schooling, and management opportunities. Know your employees’

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competencies and help direct them to ever increasing responsibility which is compatible with their competency. Remember, if you want high employee retention, empower them with the belief that they will continue to grow because you are their best mentor.

The Need for Recognition (the *R Factor*). One of the least expensive and most immediate ways to empower employees is through consistent and honest recognition for a job well done. A few years ago, a major communications company administered my personality tests to their sales reps and found that the reps had an unusually high *R Factor* in comparison to other sales reps. Their managers felt they were giving them adequate recognition for their work, but an attitude survey of these same sales reps found just the opposite. As a result, upper-level management made major changes in their corporate culture. Production boards were regularly posted; newsletters listed the top performers; and awards banquets, contests, and annual sales conferences were added to the calendar. Productivity and retention increased significantly.

You can significantly empower your employees by knowing their *R Factor* and consistently satisfying that need. To know their need, you'll have to first discover which form of recognition best matches their personality: *public* or *private*. Some employees are empowered by one-on-one recognition and others are empowered by an awards banquet or a newsletter ranking their performance for the month. Employees who are demonstrative and expressive require public recognition (or a high *R Factor*) while employees who are less expressive and more controlled place higher value on private recognition (or a low *R Factor*) such as a personal note or a sincere "thank you."

Remember that your own *R Factor* can be incompatible with your employees' needs in this area. In this case, you'll have to take an unnatural stretch to compensate. The most difficult stretch is for the leader who has a low *R Factor*. You may feel your employees' high need is frivolous (or even repulsive at times) because you aren't empowered in the same way. Leaders personalize their empowerment. Take care to honor their individual needs. When it comes to compensation motivation, employees who have satisfied their basic/deficit needs can be empowered to higher levels of performance by incentives that satisfy their being needs (mastery, recognition, advancement, or achievement). For example, an employee with a high need for public recognition (*R Factor*) can be empowered by a contest that awards a \$1,000 bonus. The public recognition that comes from winning the contest is what empowers the employee. It is what the money *represents* or what the money can do that is important.

The Need for Achievement. Another way to empower your employees is to help them feel they are achieving something significant either as a part of the team or individually. To satisfy your employees' need for achievement, consider the use of *commitments* rather than *goals*. Remember that goals are simply a roadmap to success that helps to define expectations. Goals do not typically satisfy an employee's need for achievement. However, commitments that are related to an employee's integrity are most effective when it comes to empowering your employees to achieve higher levels of productivity.

If you want to empower your employees, 1) help them define the activity that is *realistic* and *attainable*, 2) get a written commitment that is tied to their integrity, 3) make a reciprocal commitment of your own (for example, to meet with them every week), and 4) monitor/track their activity every week for 90 days. When tied to commitments, this *activity-based management* (ABM) program can empower your employees to satisfy their need for achievement. Before implementing any ABM program, make sure you don't commit the cardinal sin of demanding results that are not within the control of the employee. If your employees fail because they are *unable* (as opposed to unwilling) to perform the activity, it could negatively affect their self-esteem and their productivity. In order to make sure your employees can achieve the results, you need to make sure the commitment is realistic and attainable and they have the basic competencies to perform the job duties.

Remember that the employees' concerns about lower-level needs (job security and belonging) will cause demotivation and an inability to be empowered by upper-level needs. You will need to either: change the job description, redirect the employee to a position that is more compatible, or terminate the employee.