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Motivating Team Members: Beliefs, Values, and Approaches

Before we discuss thoughts about specific approaches to motivating team members in today's dramatically changing world of project work, we want to present some beliefs and values that we hold about people and their behavior. Our experience tells us that these beliefs and approaches to dealing with people serve as fertile soil for the growth of a motivating project team environment. Here are our beliefs, which spring from a variety of schools of thought about the psychology and performance of individuals and teams.

People possess within them, to differing degrees, an inner core of potential to do the right thing, and this core is impacted and influenced by heredity and life experiences. We, as project managers, need to assume that each person is doing the best that he or she can do in each situation, given their limitations, faulty assumptions, life experiences, and the various filters through which they see the world. Therefore, we need not take the person's behavior that personally, regardless of how dysfunctional the behavior may be. We need to look at problematic behavior differently, while neither excusing the behavior nor failing to act on the behavior. As we look at the other's behavior through this filter, we are more able to access our own resources to use in helping motivate them towards higher levels of behavior and performance.

While easy to say, this value and belief stance is clearly much harder to employ on a regular basis. However, it is our experience that the difficulty in employing it in no way diminishes it as a value to work with and to try to incorporate into our approaches to motivating team members. Now let's move on to some specific thoughts about motivation in the project team.

Motivational Challenges

Consider for a moment the challenges facing a project manager who needs to motivate his or her team members to complete a project under the constraints of time, quality, and budget. Two distinct challenges are at the top of any list:

- Today's project manager operates under the matrix leadership paradigm, needing to find creative ways to "influence" rather than "direct" the members of the team, working within the context of demanding cross-cultural projects and virtual teams.

- The project manager very likely will also be leading a collection of team members with differing personalities, unique professional backgrounds, and a disparity of team member-specific professional goals and aspirations.

Specific Approaches

Under these conditions, creating a motivating atmosphere among team members requires that the project manager consider a multifaceted approach. Steven Flannes (www.flannesassociates.com) and Ginger Levin, in their book *People Skills for Project Managers* (Management Concepts, 2001) encourage project managers to consider these suggestions for motivation:

- Avoid using clichés, slogans, and stereotypes in thinking about motivation. What motivates an individual is a function of his or her values, personality, current career stage, and professional goals.

- Always initiate a frank, direct conversation with each team member about what that individual finds is motivating for he or she. Ask open-ended questions that facilitate the team member in thinking out loud about his or her individual sources of motivation. Make this an ongoing conversation with the team member, as compared to a one-time meeting at the start of the project.

- During these discussions, be active in your questioning, using probing questions. Be honest and realistic with the team member, staying away from over promising what is not possible for the project. Help guide the team member to project activities that reflect team member passions and capabilities while still achieving mission-critical results.

The "Flow" View of Motivation

When thinking about approaches to motivation, let's consider a very interesting body of work by Mihaly Csikszentmihali, Ph.D. that has innovative applications to the subject of motivation. He has written on the subject of the "flow experience" as a crucial foundation for the presence of individual creativity, and, by implication, motivation (*Creativity*: *Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention*, HarperCollins, 1996).

Briefly stated, the flow experience involves activities that, because of their specific importance and meaning for the individual, offer the individual a deeply satisfying experience. Some of the attributes of the flow experience involve the team member's perception that there are clear action goals along each step of the work process, the chance to receive real-time feedback exists, there is a match (or balance) between the team member's skills and duties, the team member's concern for failure is minimal, self-consciousness is reduced due to the involvement in something that is very personally important, and the team member is so immersed in the task that the internal tracking of time is not paramount.

Granted, Dr. Csikszentmihali's ideas could be viewed as too esoteric to be applied to the completion of project work. However, from another perspective, the application of his ideas to project work can be tangible and practical. Specifically, the practical application of his ideas for a project manager looking for ways to motivate team members would contain these points:

- Ask the team member questions such as "What part of your work really excites you?" and "What are the things you do at work where you really lose track of time, and get deeply involved in what you're doing?" and "What's your description of the ideal work day, the type of day where you feel you that you are really firing on all cylinders?"

- Use examples from your own work life that illustrate this flow experience for you. Using this form of self-disclosure can help illustrate what you are looking for in your questions, and can be particularly helpful when having this type of conversation with a team member whose cognitive style tends to be more concrete and practical.

Team Members Are Not Static "Objects"

Having considered motivation from the perspectives described above, we want to focus now on what we believe is an important, but often overlooked contributor to the formation and continuance of a motivating environment, and that is the reminder that team members are not objects. They are not inanimate objects to which we "do" something, such as "motivate." People are evolving, changing, fluid, and, unpredictable, and we respond best when we are treated as such. The antithesis of seeing people in this respectful manner is treating them as objects that we must leverage towards common goals.

We are treating team members as objects when we view them through static or arbitrary filters. Said differently, this is the process of viewing people as a stereotype. Consider your own objectifying thoughts (we all have them!) when we ask you to observe your internal reactions when you read the words "sponsoring executive," "outside project auditor," and "corporate attorney." Like most people, you will notice a set of characteristics that you attribute to these titles. The attributions may be positive or negative, but they are still filters through which your vision may bias you towards seeing them as static objects.

Clearly, a certain degree of objectification is necessary in the world (without being able to make some assumptions about people's roles, we would be unable to function each day), but the challenge is to be aware of the nature and extent of our objectifying tendencies so that we may treat people as individuals, and therefore create the foundation for a motivating team environment.

Final Thoughts

In closing, we want to offer some specific suggestions for motivation that arise of out of our experience in different project settings. As you read this list, consider what points you would add to the list, given your own experiences in project management:

1. As a project manager, you will make great strides in creating a motivating environment when you strive for *congruence* between your words and your actions. This is a variant of the leadership admonition to "walk your talk." People have incredibly accurate antennae that pick up a lack of congruence between project manager statements and behavior. And even if the team member does not consciously register the lack of congruence, he or she will still pick up on unconscious levels that something doesn't smell right. Once that takes place, motivation will suffer to some degree, regardless of your other initiatives.

2. As we have mentioned, *ask the team member what is motivating for him or her*. They are the experts in this area, and you need to position yourself as a facilitator to assist them in articulating their sources of motivation. Know your team members as individuals. While the Golden Rule can be appropriately applied to issues of how best to treat others (being treated with respect, dignity, etc.), it does not on its own explain what will motivate others. Expressed differently, just because something motivates you is no guarantee that it will motivate others.

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