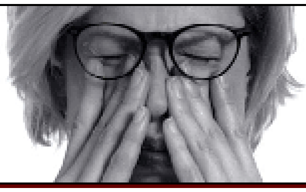

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The Ten Ironies of Motivation

Here are the top ten ironies of motivation.
By Bob Nelson

Motivation is often used to describe the feeling that prompts people to do what they do. There are numerous ironies of motivation that make the topic more difficult to understand. By examining these ironies more closely—highlighting the truths—we can avoid their pitfalls.

Irony #1:
Most managers think money is the top motivator—but, it's not.
More than anything else, employees want is to be valued for a job well done by those they hold in high esteem. "People today are looking for much more than a paycheck," says Mitchell Thall, President of Epicure. "They want to be treated like human beings. That may sound obvious, but a lot of employers don't get it." Sure compensation is important, but most employees consider it a right—an exchange for the work one does. Recognition is a gift that is truly valued—especially because it is not required by the manager.

Paul M. Cook, Founder and CEO of Raychem Corporation, supports this belief. "The most important factor is individual recognition—more important than salaries, bonuses, or promotions. Most people, whether they're engineers, business managers, or machine operators, want to be creative. They want to identify with the success of their profession and their organization. And, their greatest reward is receiving acknowledgment that they did contribute to making something meaningful happen."

Study after study has shown that praise and recognition motivates employees to put forth their best efforts and to perform at higher levels. Getting the most out of workers is above all else, a product of the "softer side" of management—how individuals are treated, inspired, and recognized. People want to feel they are making a contribution at work, and for most individuals this is a function of having the respect of peers and colleagues, having managers who tell them when they do a good job, and being involved and informed about what's going on in their department or organization.

There are countless ways to show appreciation and that add meaning to employees' jobs. When paychecks go out, write a note on the envelope recognizing an employee's accomplishment. Feature the employee in the company newsletter or videotapes. Have the company president or manager's manager call an employee to thank him or her for a job well done. Create a pass around award. Leave a voice mail praising. Distribute a positive e-mail. Read positive letters from customers or clients in your staff meetings. The list is almost endless; the principle is clear: People want to feel what they do makes a difference. Money does not do this; personal recognition does.

Irony #2:
"You get what you reward" is common sense, but not common practice in most organizations.

Everyone likes to be appreciated. Results of a recent survey by the Council of Communication Management confirm what almost every employee already knows: that recognition for a job well done is the top motivator of employee performance. Yet, how many managers consider "appreciating others" to be part of their job responsibility? Not many. Most managers fail to use the potential power of recognition and rewards. This is true despite that fact that 33% of managers themselves report that they would rather work in an organization where they could receive better recognition.

At a time when employees are being asked to do more than ever before, the resources and support for helping them are at all time lows. What used to be common courtesies have been overcome by speed and technology in today's businesses. Managers tend to be too busy and too removed from their employees to notice when they have done exceptional work—and to thank them for it. Because of technology, interfacing with one's computer terminal has replaced personal interaction between manager and employee.

In his decade-old book *Megatrends,* John Naisbitt predicted this change would happen. He said that the more our work environments become highly technical, the greater the employee need would become to be more personal and human. He called the phenomenon "high-tech/high-touch." And all this is happening at a time in which employees are seeking greater meaning in their lives—and in their jobs. The irony of the situation is that what motivates people the most takes so relatively little to do—just a little time and thoughtfulness for starters. Whatever your situation, start today to build on what's being done to make employees feel valued for the work they do.

Irony #3:
Things that are the most motivating to employees tend to be relatively easy to do and cost the least.

Personally recognizing employees' accomplishments can be easy to do as well. In a study of potential workplace motivators by Dr. Gerald Graham, professor of management at Wichita State University, three of the top five incentives ranked by employees had no cost, even though they were seldom done by employees' managers: (1) a personal thank you from one's manager for a job well done; (2) a written thank you from one's manager for a job well done; and (3) public praise. When these forms of recognition are done in a timely, sincere, and specific manner, employees feel valued and appreciated.

Most companies overlook the power and possibilities of no-cost recognition and rewards. Yet, many of the following methods can be done within the context of most every job in the workplace.

Irony #4:
What motivates others is often different from what motivates oneself.

Classic studies about what workers want from their jobs were conducted by Lawrence Lindahl in the late 1940s and repeated with similar results in the early 1980s and 1990s. When workers and supervisors were asked to rank a list of motivators from 1 to 10 in order of their importance to workers, workers rated "appreciation for a job well done" as their top motivator; supervisors ranked it eighth. Employees ranked "feeling in on things" as being #2 in importance; their managers ranked it last at #10. Managers selected good wages, job security, and promotion/growth opportunities as the primary reasons why they felt their employees worked. Employees, on the other hand, identified intangibles such as appreciation for work done, feeling "in" on things, and empathetic managers as what they most wanted from their jobs.

Employees will be motivated only if this gap in perception is closed. Managers must be sure to reward the behavior they desire with recognition that is valued and meaningful to their employees—not just themselves. To do this, ask employees what they want! This can be done in one-on-one discussions or by conducting a survey to discuss what would be meaningful recognition with your work group or in a staff meeting.

Some managers at BankBoston in Boston, MA give employees an index card to list items they find motivating. One financial analyst there told me that she listed "time off," "lunch with her manager," and "Starbucks coffee," on her index card, returned it to her manager and promptly forgot about it. She was elated, however, a month or so later, when after finishing a project she found a coupon for Starbucks coffee on her desk with a personal note of thanks from her manager. The fact that her manager took the time to find out what would be meaningful to her and then used that information in a timely way left quite an impression.

By involving those you are trying to motivate, not only are you likely to be more on the mark, but others will more likely take ownership of the recognition program or activities. Involvement equals commitment and the best management is what you do with others, not to them.

Irony #5:
Simple, fun, and creative rewards work best to motivate employees.
As Richard File, partner at Amrigon points out, "The way we see it, spending $1 on something clever and unique is better than spending $50 on something ordinary and forgettable." Yet, fun and simple ideas are often not used in businesses that view their use as inappropriate—somehow undermining the seriousness or credibility of the business.

But, it is typically the fun aspects of a celebration that make recognition a positive and motivating experience. The simpler and more creative the better. For example, a Hewlett-Packard Company engineer burst into his manager's office in Palo Alto, California, to announce he'd just found the solution to a problem the group had been struggling with for many weeks. His manager quickly groped around his desk for some item to acknowledge the accomplishment and ended up handing the employee a banana from his lunch with the words, "Well done. Congratulations!" Initially, the employee was puzzled, but over time the Golden Banana Award became one of the most prestigious honors bestowed on an inventive employee in that division.

Irony #6:
The greatest impact in using formal awards comes from their symbolic value.
The recognition value, that is, the intangible, symbolic, and emotional value, of any award is by far the most motivating aspect for employees. Formal awards are useful for acknowledging significant accomplishments, especially as they span a long period. They can also lend credibility to more spontaneous, informal rewards used regularly by management.

Yet, recognizing employees with money, merchandise, or plaques to motivate them can have negative effects. When emphasis is placed on the award, rather than the performance, employees are often given the wrong signal. Cecil Hill, corporate manager of improvement programs at Hughes Aircraft Company, claims, "I have found that certain aspects of the cash awards approach would be counterproductive at Hughes Aircraft. For example, cash awards would reduce teamwork as employees concentrated primarily on individual cash gains. We have also found instances where 'pay' for certain types of intellectual performance tends to denigrate the performance."

To maximize the effectiveness of formal awards, and to make sure that the focus of the award remains on the performance and achievement—not the award itself—managers must be skilled in how they present such awards.

- *Present awards in a public forum*. Awards are not meant to be presented in the privacy of an employee's office. Tag onto or schedule a special meeting for the occasion to place an employee "in the limelight." Besides honoring the individual who performed well, recognition is also a message to other employees about the type of performance that gets noticed in an organization. As management consultant Rosabeth Moss Kanter points out, "To the rest of the organization, recognition creates role models—heroes—and communicates the standards: These are the kinds of things that constitute great performance around here."

- *Provide a context for the recognition*. Managers need to provide a context for the accomplishment and explain how it ties to the organization's overall objectives. Will this achievement lead to enhance client satisfaction, ongoing cost savings, or other significant goals? How will the achievement potentially impact the overall success of the organization and each person in it? Providing a broader context adds significance to the achievement and to the person being honored.
- *Share your feelings.* When presenting an award, emphasize your personal feelings about the achievement or the individual who has achieved. Comments such as "I was excited by your success," or "I'm proud that you are part of my team" gives energy to the presentation. Positive feelings that are honest and sincere, add power to the moment that everyone present can feel.

Irony #7:
Recognizing performance will result in more of that behavior—and that's also when it means the most to employees.
One of Dr. Graham's conclusions to the study referenced earlier is that the most motivating incentives as reported by employees are based on performance. People want recognition for a job well done. When someone you hold in high esteem at work notices when you performed well and does something to acknowledge your efforts and results, that's when it means the most to us—especially when the accomplishment directly affects the company's bottom line. Robert Hauptfuhrer, chairman and CEO of Oryx Energy points out that "Give people a chance not just to do a job but to have some impact, and they'll really respond, get on their roller skates, and race around to make sure it happens." Other examples abound:

At Levi Strauss & Company, based in San Francisco, employees nominate one another for the company's Koshland Award for showing initiative, taking risks, generating cost-saving measures, coming up with creative ideas for promoting products at the retail level—anything that gives the company a competitive edge. Winners receive the plaque at an annual awards ceremony and a cash prize.

In Today's Way Giveaway at Dallas-based Todays Temporary, every time a temporary employee exceeds a client's expectations, he or she is entered in an annual drawing for prizes. Clients rate temporary employees on evaluation cards, which are then submitted to the company. Approximately 950 prizes have been awarded to employees over three years.

Enterprise Rent-A-Car, headquartered in St. Louis, posts the financial results of every branch office and region in plain view of all employees. A friendly rivalry between branch offices ensues, which translates into motivated employees who want to perform at their best at all times. New Jersey manager Woody Erhardt holds his fingers an inch apart and says, "We're this close to beating out Middlesex." He continues, "If they lose, they have to throw a party for us, and we get to decide what they wear."

Irony #8:
Managers don't tend to focus on employee motivation until it's lost.
Managers are often too busy focusing on what's urgent and forget about regularly motivating and recognizing employees. That is, they forget about it —- until motivation is lost. Morale sinks, employees quit—and then management must scramble to figure out ways to energize and motivate employees. At this point, regenerating poor morale is much more difficult than doing little things along the way to keep it high.

The same type of scenario is often played out as smaller companies grow. Smaller businesses have a lot of inherent motivators—variety of jobs, more direct contact with top management, more room for advancement, etc. But, as a company grows, these types of motivators disappear and management often fails to supplement them with other forms of recognition. The situation is often made worse by the increase of demotivators, such as more bureaucracy, policy manuals, approval processes, and the like.

In either situation, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. Don't wait until motivations and moral is lost to value what you have. Management should strive to consistently keep motivation and energy high. For example, whenever they achieve a major success, employees at Atlanta-based Corporate Resource Development, a sales and marketing services company, set off a siren to let all their coworkers know about it. Douglas Aircraft Distribution and Services Company in Long Beach, California, takes a similar approach. When employees generate $10,000, they are encouraged to ring a large brass bell.

Vice presidents at Nobel/Sysco, a food distribution company in Denver, conduct regular employee appreciation lunches where they cook and serve the food. As employees pass through the serving line, the vice presidents tell them how much they are appreciated. Ideas like these, and hundreds like them, help maintain a high level of employee motivation.

During stressful times at Maritz Performance Improvement Co., in St. Louis, MO, they use the "Thanks a Bunch" award. Someone brings in a bunch of flowers to give a hardworking employee who keeps one flower and card and passes on the bunch to another performer who, in turn, repeats the process. At the end of the day, they collect all the cards, and host a drawing for prizes.

Irony #9:
It takes less effort to sustain desired behavior and performance than it initially does to create it.
Recognition need not be as immediate or as frequent once you have achieved the desired behavior. Reinforcement theory tells us that after new behavior has been established, it can best be perpetuated through intermittent reinforcement. This means don't forget the behavior you wanted just because a program to promote it has ended. Selective ongoing emphasis on the behavior can perpetuate results—and at a fraction of the original time and cost.

Keep communicating about performance and achievement. Carry articles about continued results and examples of successes in your organization's newsletter or call them out publicly in meetings. For example, employee suggestions can continue to be highlighted by noting company savings from each suggestion or by interviewing top suggesters to encourage role modeling. And, have management individually thank employees who have continued to perform as desired. In the hallway, on voice mail, on a post-it note—keep saying "thanks" and "good job." You don't have to do it as often, but you do have to continue doing it is some way to perpetuate ongoing results.

Ideally, you want to make changes to your systems to help perpetuate desired behaviors, such as hiring, orientation training, evaluation and promotion guidelines. For example, at Disney they place a high value on service and assure this value is integrated into their culture, by how they hire, orient, train, and promote people based in part on one's service attitude.

Tektronix, Inc., a manufacturer of electronic instruments located in Beaverton, OR, instituted a simple way for mangers and employees alike to focus on recognizing others for doing something right. Simple memo pads were printed that had a cartoon and the heading "*You Done Good Award,"* which could be given to anybody in the company from anybody else in the company. On it, individuals state what was done, who did it and when, and then give the memo to the person. By providing this vehicle for employees to thank one another, praising happens much more often. The idea has caught on and is now part of life at Tektronix. Says Joe Floren, former communications manager for Tektronix, "Even though people say nice things to you, it means something more when people take the time to write their name on a piece of paper and say it.

Employees usually post them next to their desks."

Irony #10:
The more you help employees develop marketable skills, the more likely they are to stay with your organization.
The very definition of marketable skills implies that those who have them can be paid more in the market. Yet, I'm convinced that as you make it a priority to help employees learn and grow, they are more likely to want to stay with you because they know they are in a very special place. If you are not providing such an interest in employees—what skills they want to learn, where they want to be in five years, how they are growing in their jobs—then there is nothing that is keeping employees from wanting to stay if they get job offers elsewhere. When you make it clear that you have their best interests at heart, the payback from employees is tenfold.

According to Adelle DiGiorgio, Corporate Employee Relations Director at Apple Computer, "The message we give employees is that they're responsible for their career development, but we'll help them figure out which paths are the best for them to take." Employers like Apple Computer, and others that are supportive of employee attempts to better themselves—even if it means that they lose good workers—energize their workforce by demonstrating that their first concern is the overall welfare of the employees.

Management at Novartis (formerly Sandoz Pharmaceuticals Corporation) based in Basel, Switzerland, lets its employees know that it does not consider them disloyal for considering career paths that lead outside the company. Novartis believes that offering employees ways to enhance their future employability alleviates the anxiety connected with losing a job and demonstrates that the company truly cares about them as people.

Skill development is especially motivational for today's younger "Generation X" workforce. This generation constantly wants to learn new skills, both to keep the job exciting and challenging as well as to increase their marketability. In the words of Liesel Walsh, a consultant with Big Picture Marketing in Charleston, MA, and a Gen-Xer herself, "Manage me by teaching me things. Young workers today see themselves as marketable commodities, as an item for sale. So, if management can help them to see how an assignment we give them today makes them more marketable, how it builds their resume, that really motivates them."

Summary
It's ironic —- "motivation" is a term that is so widely used, yet many managers know little about how it really works. But the concept doesn't have to be confusing—in fact, it's quite simple. "It's up to you to decide how to speak to your people," says Mary Kay Ash. "Do you single out individuals for public praise and recognition? Make people who work for you feel important. If you honor and serve them, they'll honor and serve you." Remember, treat your employees as if they are your greatest assets—and, you will reap the rewards.

Bob Nelson is President of Nelson Motivation, Inc., located in San Diego, CA and author of the best-selling books: 1001 Ways to Reward Employees, 1001 Ways to Energize Employees, Managing for Dummies and most recently 1001 Ways Rewards & Recognition Fieldbook.