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Few topics have received more attention in talent management than motivation, defined as the deliberate attempt to influence employees' behaviors with the goal of enhancing their performance, and in turn their organizational effectiveness. Indeed, other than talent, motivation is the key driver of job performance, for it determines the level of effort and persistence employees will exert. It is also clear that top performers tend to stand out as much for their motivation as for their talents.

However, while the science of motivation is robust and well-established, it is rarely applied to real-world management practices, which tend to be based on managers' intuition and subjective experience. This is perhaps why Peter Drucker famously lamented that "we know nothing about motivation — all we can do is write books about it."

A global survey of more than 50 Fortune 1000 companies and 1.2 million employees showed that in a whopping 85% of organizations — remember, these are some of the best companies in the world — employee motivation declines sharply after people have spent six months with their managers. In other words, most employees are enthusiastic and engaged when they start their new jobs, but it takes only a few months for managers to destroy their morale. This is consistent with studies indicating that managers play a critical role in determining employee engagement, and disengagement.

And yet the solution is surprisingly simple: If you want to motivate employees, stop following your instincts and adopt a data-driven approach. In other words, approach motivation as a science rather than as an art, not least because very few individuals, including managers, are naturally good at motivating people. This process starts by acknowledging the flaws of common motivational practices and challenging their underlying myths with actual evidence.

Why do most motivational practices fail? In our view, there are four major reasons:

- **A simplistic approach to goal setting.** While goal setting is a well-researched technique for driving motivation and performance, it is not as simple as practitioners assume. For instance, research shows that stretch goals (ambitious targets) work well when the job is transactional and inputs and outcomes can be precisely defined. In contrast, when motivating someone who is working on a complex, intellectual, or creative task, asking people to "do their best" will produce better results. Furthermore, goals tend to be tied to external incentives, but these have been shown to reduce motivation and performance when employees are intrinsically motivated to accomplish the task.
- **Biased evaluations of performance.** Most managers seem to have a natural proclivity to reward employees who are like them, perhaps as an indirect and legitimate way to admire themselves (a sort of narcissism by proxy). This leads to distorted evaluations of performance, harms diversity, and creates an unfair and highly political climate. Even when the employees favored by managers are indeed high-performers or high-potentials, employees who are not fortunate enough to fit their "type" will feel discouraged and underperform. If managers become aware of this in-group bias, they will be more motivated to seek objective data to evaluate their employees' potential and performance. What they will probably realize, then, is that the overlap between the most effective and likable employees is much smaller than they thought. In fact, there is often a negative correlation between a person's talent and their likability, not least because talentless people are often quite good at faking competence.

- **The boring nature of work.** While creating distinct goals and accountabilities has helped organizations divide work into specific, measurable, and predictable components, that form of scientific management has also made jobs more repetitive and boring. This is problematic because motivation is primarily fueled by the intrinsic value that employees see in the work itself. In fact, research tells us that extrinsic rewards (like money) do little to help buffer against demoralizing or dull tasks, and psychologists have shown that while challenging work can be exciting and motivating, demanding or boring work is draining no matter what. So, while many managers see their role as motivating people through pep talks, inspirational speeches, or pizza parties, the reality is that the best way a leader can drive motivation is by designing jobs well and putting people in the right roles. This means paying close attention to the functional and psychological characteristics of the job, ensuring that it fulfills each employee's basic drivers, and helping each person to achieve something they see as meaningful. In a way, motivating a team is as much about managing personalities as anything else.
- **Useless feedback.** There is an astonishing gap between the vast academic evidence for the importance of accurate, constructive feedback as a critical driver of motivation and performance and the poor quality of feedback most employees receive at work. Indeed, many feedback interventions actually demotivate people, even when the focus is on positive aspects of performance. For example, while it's tempting to encourage people to focus on their strengths, there are substantial benefits to identifying one's flaws and performance gaps — how else can we get better? On the flip side, a boss who is overly critical or demanding becomes tiresome, and no amount of money can make up for that.

Finally, while technology and data analytics are revolutionizing many business functions, HR practices tend to lag behind. The tendency for managers to use their instincts and intuition, rather than data and science, is ubiquitous and limits real progress in improving managerial performance. Perhaps in the future, technology will be a more effective management tool than human managers. Until then, motivating and engaging people to solve complex problems with creative ideas will be a critical differentiator between human employees and their nonhuman rivals.

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