

In early 2009, extra financial rewards are not a viable option for most employers seeking to motivate their staff. In fact, monetary bonus schemes seem distinctly tainted in the current climate of widespread redundancies and national recession. This may not be a bad thing. Research has shown that monetary enticements (pay increases, bonuses, etc) exert only a transient motivational force on employees, and are soon spent and forgotten.



Rather than nurture positive emotions, financial incentives often engender feelings of jealousy, resentment and disappointment amongst staff. Employees typically compare the bonus they receive with each other, and those who feel they have been dealt with inequitably will experience strong demotivation and disillusionment³.

So what can managers do to motivate their staff throughout 2009? One answer is provided by the positive psychology movement, which argues for a strengths-based model and suggests you can dramatically enhance engagement by focusing on individuals' strengths at work. One practical and effective application of this is the manner in which you conduct 360° developmental feedback; discussed later.

Positive Psychology in the Workplace

In a seminal publication for the American Psychological Association in 2000, Positive Psychology proponents, Dr Martin Seligman and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, suggested that a strengths-based approach should replace the problem-solving mentality prevalent in modern life. Everyone has strengths; pre-existing behaviours, thoughts or feelings that energise and enable them to function optimally¹. By playing to people's strengths, organisations increase staff engagement, which leads to enhanced business performance and, ultimately, bottom line benefits. A study of 19,187 staff by the Corporate Leadership Council, for example, found that organisations emphasising performance weaknesses decreased performance by 26.8 percent, whereas those emphasising performance strengths increased performance by 36.4 percent².

According to the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology¹, a wealth of benefits await organisations using a strengths-based approach, including:

- Harnessing previously untapped talents and promoting flexibility - since individuals are encouraged to do what they do best rather than focus on improving their weaknesses.
- Improving individual performance through engaging staff with an energised, positive, open and authentic atmosphere where people can be themselves.
- Increasing diversity and encouraging inclusive teamwork, as co-operation is fostered and the different preferences and strengths reveal that one individual's non-preferred task may be another's strength.
- Building organisational resilience and the ability to adapt to change by broadening employees' mindsets and promoting creativity.

Indeed, productivity and sales performance has been found to increase as a result of the optimism and positive interactions that positive psychology interventions bring^{6,8}. Further studies have demonstrated

that teams with high levels of positive feeling are more open, supportive and creative than teams with high levels of negative emotion, which are closed, less collaborative and defensive in comparison⁶.

Within the UK, several organisations including Aviva (previously Norwich Union) and BAE Systems are already implementing strengths-based approaches, and to great success. Aviva, for instance, has redesigned their recruitment process to attract, select and recruit people for their natural talents. Results to date show substantial improvements in engagement, performance and retention, according to collaborator, Alex Linley⁵. Similarly, BAE Systems strengths-based leadership programme, encompassing leadership development master classes and executive coaching, has had a positive impact on business performance⁵.

Pragmatic interventions

So, positive psychology leads to a motivated and more productive workforce. But taking a step towards positive psychology needn't be an expensive affair. As Alex Linley and Dominic Carter, director and principle consultant at the Centre for Applied Positive Psychology, state, "In terms of interventions, our view is that the smallest thing that will make the biggest difference is enabling employees to identify and use their strengths"⁵.

A business is merely a collection of teams, so decide which team to start with first. As with any intervention it is important to have senior management buy-in from the outset; once this is achieved any leadership team is a suitable place to cultivate your strengths-based approach. Trial small positive-focused changes, evaluate progress and embed accordingly. Three interventions you might consider implementing are: appreciative inquiry, strengths-focused feedback and reviving old courtesies.

1) Appreciative inquiry

Developed by David Cooperrider in the 1980s, appreciative inquiry is a general approach focusing on promoting existing, effective working methods rather than on fixing problems. It invites people to see the need for change, explore new possibilities and contribute to solutions by rooting action in past successes rather than focusing on failures. Employing appreciative inquiry to boost organisational morale can take many forms; almost any intervention can adopt an appreciative inquiry approach. Using it as a stand alone method, however, you could survey employees to ask what they enjoyed most about working for the company in the past; what they like best about the company at present; and what suggestions they have for how the company could learn from and utilise these factors going forward. By asking your staff such questions you will force them to explicitly consider positive aspects of their working environment, something they might not have done previously, create a future-focused organisation and foster positive and meaningful communication.

2) Strengths-focused feedback

We are all familiar with the annual or bi-annual performance appraisal, where feedback on your "development areas" is regurgitated from work you delivered months previously. Each year, we aim to reduce the performance "gap" and improve upon our weaknesses - leaving many individuals feeling demotivated and, at worst, defensive. Far better would be to provide real-time, regular constructive feedback, which retains its relevance and impact. By phrasing the feedback in a positive light, development areas can be dealt with in a motivational and uplifting manner. For instance, rather than asking an employee what they feel they can improve upon in the coming months, ask if they are being

the best that they can be, how they can build on that, and what they can do more of in future. This positively-framed open questioning will still tap into performance weaknesses, but within a future-focused and constructive environment.

A useful tool for highlighting performance strengths is 360° feedback, whereby subordinates, peers, bosses and / or customers provide behavioural feedback to recipients. In addition to following best practices (clarifying the purpose of the tool; clarifying rater anonymity, accountability and selection; reviewing and interpreting the results; developing an action plan, and following up on performance progress), 360° feedback is likely to be more readily received by, and have greater impact upon, recipients if it is couched in positive / appreciative inquiry terms. Indeed, research has shown that a necessary condition for sustaining long-term behavioural change is the ability to interpret critical feedback in a positive manner⁷. Therefore, it is essential that feedback recipients should have access to a qualified coach or feedback expert who has the necessary experience to interpret and discuss the feedback in the optimal manner. While some organisations have this capability in-house, others prefer to use external consultants who have an expertise in providing impartial and confidential strengths-focused feedback. Human Assets Limited, for instance, has successfully carried out this role with a range of clients using Head Light Communications' adaptable Talent 360® software, with items specifically focusing on individuals' strengths.

3) Revive old courtesies

Whilst it may be difficult to reward extraordinary performance when money is tight, recognition of such behaviour is key to ensuring it continues. Timely positive reinforcement in the form of an authentic, sincere "thank you" is a powerful way of showing employees they are valued for their contribution, and should not be underestimated.

Similarly, the quality of relationships between colleagues is a crucial factor in establishing and maintaining a positive work culture. A 2004 IRS employment review found 63 percent of respondents citing their relationship with managers as having the greatest impact on satisfaction and commitment at work⁴. A great way of building and maintaining positive relationships is through formal or informal social events. These need not cost the earth - even the smallest of opportunities (taking people out for a cup of coffee, for instance) has impact.

Lauren Bernardi is a consultant at Human Assets Limited, with a particular interest in strengths psychology and its applications within the workplace.

If you would like further information on how your organisation can benefit from implementing a strengths-based approach, please contact Lauren Bernardi at Human Assets Limited on 020 7434 2122, email lauren.bernardi@humanassets.co.uk or visit the website at www.humanassets.co.uk

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