

What Motivates Middle Managers

By David Antonioni



Executive Summary

Executives know that the key to getting middle managers to do the best job possible is to keep them motivated. But how? In this article the author breaks down the factors that contribute most to high motivation levels and shows how executives can keep middle managers' enthusiasm up.

Three factors stand out as the most effective motivators of mid-level managers: trust, respect, and caring.

Tom Peters was the first to describe the importance of these factors 10 years ago, claiming that they were present in all the best-run companies. Though Peters made observations about motivation factors, he did not provide empirical evidence. This article builds on his work by introducing data from applied research studies conducted with more than a thousand mid-level managers. The objective of these studies was to find out which factors motivate managers and how delegation of decision-making and participation in the goal-setting process are related to motivation and empowerment.

The average age of the participants in the study was 38; they had worked both for the organization and with their immediate supervisors for an average of three years. Seventy-six percent of the managers were men; 58 percent of the companies in the study were in the manufacturing sector.

Best and worst motivators

The amount of effort people are willing to put into their work usually depends on the degree to which they feel their motivational needs will be satisfied. Individuals become demotivated when it seems to them that something in their organization prevents them from attaining good outcomes. The challenge for management is to create an environment in which high levels of motivation are maintained and people can re-motivate themselves quickly.

The top 10 motivators are shown in Figure 1. Managers

Top 10 motivators

1. Respect for me as a competent and committed person
2. Mutual trust with immediate manager
3. Participation in decisions that affect my area
4. Enjoyment of the work
5. Opportunity for self-development
6. Feeling that the job is important
7. Upper management's awareness of my job results
8. Fairness in how people are rewarded for work performance
9. Full appreciation for work well done
10. Working on special projects of my choice.

Figure 1

reported that feeling respected is the most important motivator, followed by mutual trust with one's manager. Many other top motivation factors are related to caring: participation in decisions that affect the manager's own area, upper management's awareness of their contributing managers' job results, fairness in how people are rewarded, and feedback about work performance.

The factors ranked as the least motivating were the availability of day care facilities through the organization, attention paid to improving physical work conditions, time off as a reward for high performance, and job redesign to make the position more interesting and challenging.

An employee's lack of motivation may result from the absence of specific factors. Figure 2 lists the areas that show the biggest gaps between the level of importance managers indicated and how much these motivators existed in their motivational environments. Managers indicated that they were least motivated when they believed that people were not being rewarded fairly for performance. Managers also indicated that they wanted more appreciation for work well done and for executives to be more aware of the results they produced. Finally, managers experienced a gap between their need for respect and the respect they received.

The results also indicate that delegation of full decision-making authority is strongly related to feelings of empowerment. Managers reported that they felt most empowered when executives delegated decision-making tasks without requiring them to report back after tasks were completed. They experienced autonomy, were able to influence the work they did, and felt confident in their abilities to do the work. However, delegation of full decision-making authority was not motivational; motivation was strongly related only to delegation of joint decision-making authority. Furthermore, the results of the studies demonstrated that full participation in

setting goals is positively related to motivation and degree of empowerment. Managers indicated that they did not like goals imposed on them without meaningful face-to-face discussion with executives. Finally, managers reported that they wanted an opportunity to share their action plan for attaining their goals with immediate supervisors to gain their supervisors' support for the plan.

Steps to higher motivation

Common sense suggests that managers want to be respected, to participate in decisions that affect their areas, to experience mutual trust with their immediate managers, to enjoy the work they do, and to get fair rewards and appreciation for work well done. What, then, can a company do with this knowledge? If these factors are not present in the motivational environment, what will create or increase the presence of these factors?

Managers want more respect. In some cases, managers reported that they discuss problems with and offer solutions to executives but that nothing results from their conversations. They want executives to listen actively to their concerns about operations, pay attention to their recommendations, and support viable suggestions. Managers want to be respected for their knowledge of business operations. Therefore, executives need to involve managers in the strategic thinking process. Mid-level managers have invaluable firsthand knowledge of the operations of their organizations; however, they rarely are involved in the strategic thinking process. That must change if managers are to feel more respected.

One practical way for executives to build trust is to share relevant information in a timely manner. Managers reported that they trusted executives more when they received timely business information that helped them solve problems and make decisions. Executives can also build trust by supporting their words with action — “walking the talk.” Executives need to realize that transformation begins with them. Managers will follow their actions. Too often, executives criticize managers for resisting change while sending off signals that they are not implementing the changes they advocate.

Executives must do more to involve managers in decisions

Motivation factors middle managers say they don't get

Largest gaps between desired and existing motivation factors
Fairness in how people are rewarded for work performance
Participation in decisions that affect my area of responsibility
Receiving timely and specific positive feedback for high performance
Respect for me as a competent and committed person
Full appreciation for work well done

Figure 2

that affect their areas of responsibility, especially when major changes are being made. Managers must be included in the planning stages of organizational change, not just the implementation stage. It is important to seek information from managers about the losses and gains they may experience from major changes, and it is crucial to involve managers when developing remedies for the losses.

Managers are affected by the leadership style of their executives, especially by the ways executives demonstrate caring and consideration. Some managers resent being assigned to projects or teams without being asked. As one manager noted, "My manager never checks with me about the resources I have to handle the work my area is expected to do." Executives often believe that managers will inform them when they cannot handle the workload. However, managers dread telling executives that they cannot handle additional projects for fear of showing weakness. If executives care enough to converse with managers about demands and resources, work tasks will be allocated more effectively.

Executives also can demonstrate caring and consideration by spending more time providing informal coaching. Most managers want good coaching, from executives. Middle managers want and need coaching on how to deal effectively with work processes. Through informal coaching, executives can work with managers to identify the root causes of the problems and develop practical solutions. Furthermore, executives are in a position to make sure solutions are implemented. This means executives need to learn how to coach well and then spend time coaching when opportunities arise.

Executives need to be aware of the results produced by middle managers. One way to learn more about what managers are doing is to ask them to complete a monthly "shine sheet" of results accomplished that easily could go unnoticed until the end of the year. For example, one manager in the study reported that he caught a mistake that could have cost the company \$50,000. The manager was fortunate to have biweekly update meetings with his immediate supervisor; therefore, he was recognized for his good deed. Another way executives can raise their awareness is simply to make a habit of spending time in the managers' work area. This offers an opportunity for informal coaching as executives get to know managers and have candid conversations about the enablers and barriers to high performance.

Organizations need to stop rewarding low performance. Management must refuse to give merit raises when perfor-



mance does not meet expectations. Organizations are losing lawsuits in termination cases because plaintiffs can point to merit raises they received, even when the raise was only 1 percent. Litigation may be averted by consistently denying merit raises to poor performers. Of course, people should be given an opportunity to improve; therefore, specific time-bound improvement goals should be established along with plans for attaining the goals.

Executives need to realize the importance of giving managers timely, specific, positive feedback for high performance. This may be a mindset change for some executives who operate with the assumption that "As long as you do not hear from me you are doing a good job." The most effective executives care enough to give authentic verbal praise directly to individuals, during public acknowledgements, or through written comments, and do so throughout the year. Executives need to celebrate work well done continuously.

Executives need to be aware that delegating full decision-making authority to individuals is not motivational. The results of interviews conducted at the conclusion of the study indicated that delegated tasks involving full decision-making are less challenging than delegated tasks involving joint decision-making between managers and their immediate supervisors. Managers in the study felt that tasks that had been delegated fully to them simply had been dumped on them. However, when decisions were made mutually, managers felt that their supervisors trusted and respected them and gave them opportunities to learn and grow in their careers. Thus, the way decisions are made seems to affect perceptions of empowerment and motivation. Managers also indicated that, for fully delegated work, motivation could be increased through timely and specific recognition for work well accomplished. Managers in the study said that they rarely heard from their managers after completing fully-delegated tasks.

Managers in the study felt that tasks that had been delegated fully to them simply had been dumped on them.

Executives need to establish a balance between joint and fully delegated tasks. Overuse of full delegation, especially of less meaningful work, can be perceived by managers as “gofer” delegation. Most managers want tasks that will help them develop. If delegators balance full and joint delegation levels, individuals may feel less put-upon, especially if they know they can expect both levels of delegation in the future.

When joint decision-making is used, it is important to present it in a way that increases an individual’s sense of empowerment. Remember that managers already feel motivated by joint delegation. What they need is a feeling of autonomy, effectiveness, and self-efficacy. Managers indicated that executives could increase empowerment when the meaning and impact of the decisions were explained more fully. Often, respondents had to guess at the significance of their work in the larger picture. Executives must spend more time helping middle managers build their problem-solving and decision-making skills so they can make more autonomous decisions. In others words, executives need to frame joint decision making as a process leading to increased empowerment.

The recommendations listed above have one common thread: Executives need to spend more time with their mid-level managers. It is very easy for executives to get busy with

activities that do not involve their managers. In addition, executives can assume that if managers are doing fine it is not necessary to spend time with them or that it is not a good idea to involve managers because they are busy. However, one important way for executives to demonstrate respect, trust, and caring is to spend regular quality time with middle managers. Spending this time pays off by contributing to a motivational environment in which managers choose to be high performers. ■

The Author



David Antonioni, Ph.D., is associate professor of management in the School of Business at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and chair of executive and management education. He is also the director of the mid-management development certificate and the masters certificate in project management programs. Antonioni teaches management development seminars and serves as a consultant to business and industry in a number of areas, especially in designing and implementing 360-degree feedback processes.

THIRD ANNUAL APPLIED ERGONOMICS CONFERENCE



MARCH 13, 2000
PRE-CONFERENCE SEMINARS

MARCH 14-16, 2000
CONFERENCE

LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA
WILSHIRE GRAND HOTEL

Learn ergonomics applications from successful case studies in manufacturing, services, construction, offices, design/engineering products, rehabilitation/health management, ergonomics programs, cost justification, auditing and more.

Featuring more than 100 successful ergonomics applications from a variety of industries, this conference presents a variety of speakers and topics in multi-track format. Planned benchmarking roundtables will provide valuable information on best practices.

Who should attend?
Ergonomists • Engineers • Ergonomics Committees • Ergonomics Teams • Industrial Hygienists • Human Resource Professionals • Occupational Health Professionals • Safety/Health Directors • Risk Managers

For more information, go to <http://www.iienet.org/conted/ergoconf.htm> or call Member and Customer Support at 800-494-0460 (770-449-0460).



Presented by the
Institute of Industrial Engineers
National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health
Occupational Safety and Health Administration

