Why Motivation and People Performance Leadership is Vital

Why Motivate?
Let’s talk about NOT motivating your teams. Why should you? After all, they are paid to do their jobs, right? This is unfortunately a very common comment from managers who grew up in a culture of strict hierarchies and top-down direction and control. Cultures like these create compliance at best and rebellion at worst. “Well, what’s so wrong about compliance?” you may say. Compliance is great if it is in regard to safety and security. However, if you run a project or a program and need top performance, compliance can be devastating. Imagine giving directions for a task and missing out on a step or two. Compliance means that the task won’t be done to the standard needed, but to the letter of the word, i.e., your direction. Also, compliance means you get what you ask for, and no more.

What happens when we motivate people? Take any example of a team you have worked with where people were motivated to do a really good job. Team members go above and beyond the direct tasks to deliver better, faster and more of what you need. The motivated team member even challenges the status quo, finding better ways to deliver better results. My experience of this is that team members often think of new and better ways of doing things, challenging me when I ask for something. I have to admit, I seldom had the best idea. I started the idea generation and the team members built on it. They will find better solutions, more innovative ways of doing their work, and deliver much better results.

Looking at my experiences from many projects and programs, we do need to make sure the team stays motivated.

What to Motivate
First, let us look at what it is we want to motivate people to do. It isn’t enough to walk around like Young Mr. Grace in the English sitcom Are You Being Served? waving at people cluelessly telling them to get on with their job and that they are doing it great. What are they doing great? Well, that’s a good question.

Let’s look at what companies, or more precisely managers and executives, focus on—sometimes to the detriment of the organization. The focus of most companies is on results. At first glance that seems right, but if we dig in deeper we find that there is a flaw in focusing on results. The problem is that results are lag indicators. That means the results come AFTER we have performed. For example, the financial results of the organization come after we have finished a contract, a quarter or a year. What then drove these results, or in other words, what is the lead indicator?

Performance is the lead indicator. Great performance leads to better results. This means that, in order for us to manage results, perhaps a misnomer, we must manage performance. Let’s make an analogy to understand this point. Think of a kids’ soccer team. The team is behind 3-0 in halftime and the coach
has gathered the kids for a halftime pep talk: “You have to score more goals next half!” may sound like good advice, but wait a minute—don’t the kids already know that this is the objective of the game? Wouldn’t they have scored plenty of goals had they only gotten a chance? A good coach in this situation looks at the performance of the players and gives them advice on how to perform better next half which, if things work out, will lead to better results: “Make sure you keep your positions and spread out more in the attacks” might be much better advice.

Next, under which category is a good description of what performance we want to see? There is a very large trap that many corporations fall in when trying to manage performance—LABELS. A label is a grouping of behaviors that is useful in cataloging certain behaviors, but does little or nothing to help an individual team member understand what to do better. Imagine a good friend of mine who was told he needed to improve his “Executive Leadership.” When he asked his superior what he meant by “Executive Leadership” he was told that it was “Leadership, Executive style,” not a very helpful twisting around of an expression. The problem with labels is that they are interpreted in as many ways as there are people using them. Another similar example was an employee working for me when I first started out as a training supervisor in the US. This employee, a systems technician—let’s call him Billy—and I were sitting down for a development discussion. I told Billy that he was my most professional team member. This was a great label we used at my company at the time. Billy was extremely surprised and looked at me in bewilderment, saying, “But I haven’t worn a tie all year.” I then had to explain that he was coming in early to help set up, staying during classes to help instructors, and always making sure the test systems were working. A very professional behavior, I thought. Billy thought wearing a tie was professional.

Instead of labels as a descriptor of performance, we need to define what BEHAVIOR we wish to see. There is quite an easy way to get to behaviors from a label. When someone offers up a label as a descriptor, simply ask “What does it look like?” This little phrase is the key to unlocking the performance we want to see repeated. Behaviors are observable and measurable. You can use one or more of your five senses to verify a behavior. It also makes the person whom you want to manage understand what exactly it is they need to do to perform better. Examples of translating a label to behaviors might be:

**Label:** Self-starter

**Behaviors:** Starts a new task without being told, takes on tasks from others when finished with her own, etc.

Notice how the behaviors are observable and measurable. So far, we have looked at the why and what of motivation. In the next part, we will look at how this will help us to get the best out of our team.

**How to Motivate**

Let’s start with two concepts we all know about and straighten them out just a little bit: Positive and Negative Feedback. Many leadership programs talk about Positive and Negative Feedback, but here we will separate them a bit and instead call them Positive Reinforcement and Feedback, respectively. I will
use the definitions from my friend Rudy Pilotto of Serious Consulting in Australia, a behavioral psychologist working with improving people and organizational performance.

**Positive Reinforcement** – “I do something and I get something I want.” This means that the team member displayed a desired behavior, and we or someone else rewarded that behavior with something the team member liked. We will come back to this in more detail later since this is the key to success.

**Feedback** – “Information I can use to improve.” In this instance, a team member receives feedback for a behavior that someone thinks he or she can improve. Whether that’s true or not is beside the point right now. The receiver of the feedback determines whether or not to use the information to improve. Be aware that there have been programs that prescribe “softening” Feedback by giving it wrapped in Positive Reinforcement, before and after delivering the Feedback. Sure, this makes it easier for you to deliver “bad news” to a team member, but does the team member understand what you mean? The optimists will walk away happy that they are doing a great job, forgetting about any improvements. The pessimists will walk away feeling ambivalent about the whole thing and still not really understand what you want them to do.

It is about now that, when delivering this presentation in person, we start getting pushback from people saying that this may be too much or that the team members may feel it is insincere. This is a great comment since it leads us to the next part of how to deliver Positive Reinforcement and perhaps also Feedback. Remember the old saying “Praise in public, reprimand in private?” This is not absolutely correct. Reprimand or deliver Feedback in private may be a good idea, but as for Positive Reinforcement, it depends on the receiver. Check out the personal category below. To make all of this clear we use an acronym, HIPS.

**Honest** – Any reinforcement must be honest. People can smell it a mile away if you don’t really mean what you are saying. Telling a team member that they did a great job with something easy or simple will make them think there is something wrong or that you have something up your sleeve, and it’s not good. Instead, we need to look at when people go above and beyond their duty, helping out in an area outside their responsibility, or solving a very difficult problem.

**Immediate** or as soon as possible is the next tip. Positive Reinforcement and Feedback need to be delivered as close to the time the team member displayed the behavior we want to work on. Annual appraisals do not meet this criterion. Even a month later can be difficult, at least for someone with as bad a memory as mine. Instead, make sure you catch the person within a day or two and deliver the Positive Reinforcement or Feedback while the situation is still fresh in both of your minds.

**Personal** ties back to when we described Positive Reinforcement above. “I do something and I get something I want.” That “something I want” is the key as well as the way I want it. Different people regard rewards differently. A great example came from another Australian friend, Jon Young. He was the manager for a large organization in Australia. One employee had created a solution that gave the organization a considerable savings. Jon, who had learned from an earlier mistake, decided to ask the employee what he wanted for a reward, being just a bit nervous about the person asking for a large monetary award which was outside of what Jon could do. When asked, the employee shone like the sun
and said, “I’d like to take Friday and Monday off so I can go on a walkabout.” You never know what they want until you ask. We have seen many examples of misguided rewards and recognition systems. Another example was a UK technology firm that instituted “Engineer of the Month” with chocolate or wine as a reward. OK, this was not the worst part. The worst part was that, in addition to calories or alcohol, a photo of the winner was placed on every door in the complex. It didn’t take much time before these photos were losing teeth or growing mustaches. The winner of the month was picked through peer nominations. The second month of this program, engineers were going around “threatening” colleagues if they even thought about nominating them.

*Specific* is the last piece of the puzzle in HIPS. Specific goes back to what we said about behaviors vs. labels. The team member must be able to understand exactly what it was they did that you either like (Positive Reinforcement) or want them to improve (Feedback). “Great job last week, keep it up” is not very specific. *What did I do well last week? Wait, I did take that three hour lunch on Wednesday; maybe that is what I did great? I’ll start doing that more often then.* As we see, this does not necessarily improve or drive the right behavior and can also be counterproductive. Instead, saying “In the meeting last week, when you explained the advantage of our solution to the customer, that was really good work, understanding their objections and countering it like that. Thanks!” is much better. The team member knows exactly what they did and can now work on doing it again.

So in summary, Positive Reinforcement and Feedback are used to increase team performance—one maximizes a behavior, the other improves it. Deliver these following the HIPS rules and team performance will improve. Next on the agenda is: *When we should deliver the Positive Reinforcement and how we Follow-Up (Plan, Execute and Track) to make it stick.* Follow along as we drive performance to higher levels.

**When to Motivate**

Just as we talked about HIPS in the previous part of this article, it’s now time to talk about *when, or how often*, to deliver Positive Reinforcement. We are now assuming that you have worked with your team members, delivering both Positive Reinforcement and Feedback. The Feedback has started to work for you to the point that the team members now mostly display behaviors for which you provide Positive Reinforcement. The question now is, “Can reinforcement be done too often?” Quick answer is, yes it can, but it seldom is.

Let’s start out with an analogy to make this point. Remember a child in your family or one of your friends’ children when they started walking? What do parents do when their child starts walking? They get down on their knees, clapping their hands, encouraging the little one to walk. This is what we refer to as Continuous Reinforcement. Every time the child takes a step, we are there reinforcing it. Now fast forward to today and assuming you are not in a wheelchair, do people around you still get excited and clap their hands when you take a couple of steps? I use to joke that my mom did do that, encourage me seeing me walk, when I was in my twenties but only on a late Saturday night. Seriously, we stop reinforcing a behavior when it gets cemented, or it becomes the norm. It is no longer necessary to reinforce walking for an adult. What this describes is something the psychologists call Thinning.
Thinning is the process of spacing out Positive Reinforcement as the behavior gets more and more cemented. A top performer does not need to hear on a daily basis that they are doing a great job coding, building or whatever they are doing expertly. However, they do need to hear it now and then. Be aware that top performers typically can go for long periods without reinforcement, but don’t let them. Instead, find out what they do and make an effort recognizing when they do something above and beyond even for them. New performers, team members new to their jobs, need a lot more reinforcement. Initially, it may be necessary to provide Continuous Reinforcement, thinned down to maybe twice a day after a week, and finally once a day week two. You’ll notice that you have thinned too much if the behavior of your team members is going down for no obvious other reason. A good rule here is to ask how much help they need and be available to the team.

Follow Up, Make it Stick
A very important subject in all changes, as improving behaviors is a change, is how do we make these changes or improvements stick? There are many answers to this question and I just want to show one simple method to follow up on improvements. Let’s say we have identified a number of areas to improve for an individual or a team. The first thing to do is to break these areas down in smaller, more manageable steps. Wow—suddenly we are on much firmer ground here! This is familiar territory to us project and program managers; this is creating a Work Breakdown Structure, correct? We want to take the improvement and list all the steps it’ll take us to get to that level. If you are unfamiliar with WBS you may think of this as a to-do-list to get to the end result. Let’s look at the steps in this process.

Plan
First, we need to develop the plan to get to the end result or improvement. Start this by defining all the steps needed to get to the end result. For example, to improve my skill in a new language I may create the following steps: 1. Investigate the available training sources. 2. Select and procure materials. 3. Study Part I of the materials. 4. Take Test I to identify weak points. 5. Study weak points. 6. Take Test I again to verify improvement, and so on. Next, we all know we need to set dates for these steps, at least I know from personal experience. OK, I admit, I do sometimes suffer from the Student Syndrome, leaving things until last minute. Setting dates for certain steps help me drive my own progress, which leads to the next step.

Execute and Track
It is now time to have the team members execute their plans and track their progress. I prefer doing this using a variation of Earned Value (no, don’t stop reading—this is the really cool bit). Since we set dates for the various steps in the plan, we have everything we need to create a baseline. Give each step a value (one or ten, it doesn’t matter) then multiply step 1 (investigate the available training sources) by that value (1 or 10) and plot that value on the date you plan on finishing it. Next, continue this for all steps in your plan, adding each step’s value to the previous result. You get a line which we, for all practical purposes, can call the Planned Value. See Figure 1.
Next, as you complete each task, add your score for the completed tasks and plot those as your Earned Value. See Figure 2.

This is your Earned Value and shows “progress against planned.” By the way, these graphs and the corresponding Excel matrix (see Figure 3) have been used in many organizations to track progress. The real power with these graphs and matrices come from their use as score cards, providing daily or weekly updates on progress. It gets really good when teams post these outside their areas so that everyone can see the improvements.

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**Successes**

Finally, let’s talk about a success story using these techniques. I will change a few names to protect the guilty and punish the innocent. Many years ago, a large technology company had a really low-performing unit in one country. An intervention was started by the new boss with the help of a small, external consulting firm. The global company kept a ranking of all its units and this particular unit found
itself in spot number 17 out of 17 units worldwide. Their on-time delivery as well as quality was at the bottom of the heap. A new manager arrived, and using the consulting firm, started a study of why performance was so bad. Two things stood out in the results: lack of management and lack of objectives. The new manager, being a smart individual, asked what “lack of management” looked like. He got a couple of answers, number one being accessibility/visibility. With that he instituted a “management by walking around” scheme where he would spend at least 30 minutes to an hour a day walking around and talking to people. The second thing he addressed was the lack of objectives. He defined the desirable behaviors, leading to the desired results, and started the tracking of teams’ goals on matrices as described above. Within two to three years, this organization went from a 17th ranking to a 3rd and was recognized for outstanding performance.

Summary
Motivating people, recognizing excellent behaviors and reinforcing that behavior, as well as providing feedback to improve, is a key skill for any project or program manager. Organizations don’t run projects and programs—people do. Knowing what, how, and when to reinforce is a core skill every Manager needs. The good news is it can be learned.

References
Concepts and techniques were compiled from Rudy Pilotto and Jon Young at Serious Consulting in Australia. www.seriousconsulting.com.au

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