How to Keep Staff Motivated

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Since at least the 1930s, researchers have been studying factors that contribute to job satisfaction. Many prioritized lists have emerged from their surveys, about which several things have been discovered. The priority of the different factors on a list varies according to a number of variables, a partial list of which is as follows: (1) the type of industry; (2) general business conditions at the time of the survey; (3) gender; (4) level of job; (5) generational factors affecting roles and goals; (6) level of education of respondents; and (7) size of the organization.

From its annual survey for 2012, the Society of Human Resource Management identifies the following overall factors in order of importance (disregarding the seven variables above):

1. Opportunities to use skills and abilities
2. Job security
3. Compensation/pay
4. Communication between employees and senior management
5. Relationship with immediate supervisor
6. Benefits
7. Organization's financial stability
8. The work itself
9. Managements recognition of employee job performance
10. Autonomy and independence
11. Feeling safe in the work environment
12. Overall corporate culture
13. Flexibility to balance life and work issues
14. Career advancement opportunities
15. Relationships with co-workers
16. Meaningfulness of job

17. Organization's commitment to professional development
18. Job specific training
19. Contribution of work to organization's business goals
20. Career development opportunities
21. Variety of work
22. Organization's commitment to corporate social responsibility
23. Paid training and tuition reimbursement programs
24. Networking
25. Organization's commitment to a diverse and inclusive workplace
26. Organization's commitment to a "green" workplace

Note that on the list above, items within about three places of one another are statistically tied, because of the margin of error of the survey. And if they were applied to the list, the variables described in paragraph 1 above also would affect the rankings. Consequently, the list can be used not to identify precisely the most important items in order of priority but to identify the most important factors and, in a general way, to report the relative importance of items as revealed in one professionally executed survey.

CLE Factors. In our line of work, so far as we know, nobody has done a survey of the most potent factors affecting job satisfaction. Most factors are likely the same for CLE staff, but some variables may differ — e.g., generation, level of job, the present economy, or maybe gender.

So, the best we can do for the present discussion is the judgment of experienced CLE managers. Below is a list of fifteen "most important factors" for motivating staff generally. The list is mainly aimed at big state bars (Texas has a combined CLE and publications staff of about 60). Specific considerations for smaller staff sizes are also noted (The Florid Bar CLE Publications department has 3.5 staff positions).

1. Develop a semi-personal relationship with as many staff as possible — know the names of spouses, kids, favorite beer, favorite sports teams, etc. But don't confuse the managerial relationships with friendship; you have to

maintain enough objectivity to evaluate staff for raises, discipline and, when all else fails, terminations.

It almost goes without saying that this is particularly important with smaller staff, where you cannot afford to have anyone feel unincluded or alienated.

2. Don't mess around about pay. Make sure that everyone knows what the compensation landscape is in your organization — the general magnitudes and timing of raises, bonuses, and benefits. Many of us work as part of other or larger entities and don't get to make some important decisions about pay and benefits. In any case, make sure that issues about pay and benefits are dealt with quickly and explained fully. Don't let an unrealistic expectation, good or bad, run amok.

3. Be flexible. Look for opportunities to be flexible about work schedule in ways that benefit employees. Flexibility, especially as regards children's schedules, can make such a difference for some employees that they would otherwise not be able to work for you. For other employees, the opportunity to pursue a degree or extra training, even during part of the work day, is a huge benefit. Flexibility of schedule depends on the nature of the job, of course. Other kinds of flexibility are also highly valued.

4. Be visible and listen to staff concerns. Do some management by walking around to show that things, from your perspective, are OK. Be friendly. Ask about projects. See if anyone needs help.

This is especially important with small staff operating with deadlines. And you should always be ready to roll up your shirtsleeves and take up slack when needed.

5. Make sure staff knows the "why" of things. A few gifted staff can perform with minimal information, but most need to know the relational or financial or political elements — the bigger picture — of what they're working on. When anomalies come up, they will be better informed to make judgments that fit the situation, or will be alerted to ask questions to avoid doing something stupid.

6. Back them up. You should be able to trust your staff, and they should know you trust them. This builds their confidence in you as a manager and in their own abilities as well. Discuss in advance, for instance, about how much a staff member personally can offer to important or disgruntled customers — e.g., full refund, $20 cash because the customer can't eat the buffet lunch you've provided, the first round of drinks at the speakers' dinner, an extra night's stay at the hotel, etc. In general, strive to back staff up even when you think that they went a bit too far.

7. Have weekly meetings with all or most staff in attendance. They can be short (ours are 30-40 minutes on Monday mornings), but everyone needs to be able to see all those other people working on the other parts of the elephant. At our meetings, everyone is expected to give a very quick update on what they worked on last week and what's coming up for this week. I make a point to ask at the meeting whether anyone needs help and try to arrange it on the spot if possible. Making everyone say something is important since the meeting is set up implicitly to recognize the carefully balanced system that makes it all work and the vital importance of each contributor. Meetings also help in staying on deadlines, which is the continuing order of the day in the seminar business.

   However, particularly with small staff who likely have a good sense of the overall workflow, be mindful when considering implementation of a weekly meeting schedule. Meeting for the sake of meeting is not productive and if staff feels they are wasting time, they may become resentful and unwilling to meaningfully participate. Also, some people are averse to attending any meeting on a Monday morning! An alternative to frequent meetings is to use a written project schedule.

8. Get behind certain social events — e.g., wedding and baby showers, lunches welcoming new employees and saying goodbye to those departing, birthday lunches. We have an annual bowling party during the holidays. Some CLE organizations have elaborate off-site staff retreats, but as employees of the state of Texas, we are somewhat limited in that direction.

With small staff, be careful about implementing this suggestion. Not all staff enjoy social events and do not appreciate being pressured into participating in activities they are not comfortable with.

9. Train, train, train. Get staff trained early and thoroughly. Many disappointing personnel situations for us probably resulted from inadequate training at the beginning. Look for ways — e.g. ACLEA, online tutorials, organized on-staff mentoring — for staff to improve their knowledge and skills.

   For new employees, don't leave all of the training to others. In order to properly gauge the progress of new personnel, you should spend one-on-one time with them reviewing their progress and assessing their needs.

10. Model an attitude of relentless cheerfulness and forward motion. Some employees become so troubled by the possible severity of circumstances, present or future, that it cripples their performance and damages the tone of the workplace. If these interpretations are accurate, they can be useful. But the leader of the band gets to set and re-set the tone of the joint, which needs to be one of constant careful thought and forward motion. There's no slacking off here: you have to directly confront the obstacles that staff may spot, and you are well advised to directly enlist their creativity on how to overcome them.

    The key here, especially with small staff, is to be careful to set a positive tone while still being realistic. Be honest. Don't deny obstacles, acknowledge them, and draw on the resources of every team member to find solutions.

11. Establish rituals. If you are on the staff of TexasBarCLE and you have a birthday ending in a zero, on your natal day our staff delivers to your work space two stuffed buzzards, a little one cute and a big one ugly, which you must prominently display until someone else on staff has a birthday ending in a zero. Such ceremonies cement the organization in a funny and predictable way that builds a sense of friendly inclusion.

But consider your staff's personalities and dispositions before creating a ritual. For some staff, rituals may be silly or obnoxious, and could be counter-productive, especially with small staff. In any event, you should solicit input from staff on which rituals they may or may not want to observe.

12. Celebrate success. Publicly acknowledge and cheer on the success of staff. We make a point of reading aloud letters and emails from customers and volunteers about unusually helpful staff behavior.

    Private acknowledgment is also important. And keep in mind that some staff may not feel comfortable with public acknowledgment.

13. Work hard on diversity and inclusivity. The old wisdom about hiring only people who, in some special way, are "like us" or who would be "most comfortable working here" can, unless it be brought to the surface, cover up uncomfortable biases. Also important is the manager's not becoming too identified with any of the various subgroups in the organization. This may be hard to do if you have worked with certain employees over many years. But a diverse workplace where no "clique" is seen to control every outcome sure beats the alternatives.

    With small staff especially, hire carefully to balance the needs of your team. Avoiding high turnover is a priority.

14. Respect your staff. Be sensitive to distinct personality differences that result in different work styles. Whether it's Myers-Briggs scores or some other measure, it is absolutely clear that different people see the world and the work differently. One of the biggest differences among your colleagues is the extroversion-introversion dimension. If you force too much socializing over every work issue, for instance, then you are not honoring approximately one third or more of the workers who strongly prefer to be given an opportunity to think over the issue in private and to report back later. Introverts are often capable of tremendous flights of creativity and analysis if you give them the time to do so. Brainstorming among strong extroverts, on the other hand, might result in the proverbial camel — a horse designed

by a committee — with too little careful thought and perhaps too much bonhomie.

15. Share responsibility and authority. When a staff person gets an assignment, she will feel a lot better about it if she is responsible for the final result, without being micromanaged to bring it about. She also needs the authority and tools to make it happen. Be careful to make assignments with plenty of attention to both the facts and the nuances of the situation, so the result can be finely tuned — i.e., avoid piece-work situations when possible. The employee should have responsibility for all work of a certain sort, not just random tasks that happen to get your attention and that you dole out arbitrarily.

With small organizations, staff should be cross-trained. You, as the manager, have to know what your staff is working on and how to do their jobs to be ready to jump in case of emergency.