

Focus Experts' Briefing: How to Motivate Employees When You Can't Promote Them

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Focus Experts' Briefing: How to Motivate Employees When You Can't Promote Them

How do you motivate your employees when there is limited upward mobility for them in the company?

March 31, 2011

by John Anderson, Guy Farmer, Brian Lowenthal, Glen Marshall, Tim Rutledge, Wayne Spivak, Jim Watson

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Executive Summary

Career advancement is often a prime motivator among high-achieving employees. But in a small business, there may not be many chances for upward mobility simply due to the size of the company. How do you hang on to your key employees who are looking for that promotion? How do you keep them happy and motivated without moving them up the ladder? In this guide, Focus Experts John Anderson, Guy Farmer, Brian Lowenthal, Glen Marshall, Tim Rutledge, Wayne Spivak and Jim Watson share their advice for motivating employees when you can't promote them.

After reading this guide, be sure to check out the entire discussion and join the conversation:

<http://www.focus.com/questions/general-management/how-do-you-motivate-your-employees-when-there-very-limite/>.

Expert Advice

1. Set expectations and keep the lines of communication open.
2. Ask employees what motivates them — and what discourages them.
3. Recognize employees' achievements often and openly.
4. Promote cross-training, employee growth and ongoing education.
5. Help employees focus on the larger perspective, beyond the office walls.
6. Forget the stocks, and think outside the box.

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How do you motivate your employees when there is limited upward mobility for them in the company?

1. Set expectations and keep the lines of communication open.

"The best way I have found is to set the expectations right from the point of employment. If people are hired in knowing that there are a limited number of 'rungs in the ladder,' they will hold a different view of what being successful at this company looks like." (Anderson)

"Be as open and candid as you can with employees. If your company is experiencing hard times, don't try to gloss it over or pull a disappearing act. When employees hear that you're all in this together, that can be motivating." (Rutledge)

2. Ask employees what motivates them — and what discourages them.

"Ask each employee in your company what would motivate them, then put in place a development process to address their expectations. You should expect them to provide you with three answers. If you aren't able to address their first and second choice, you have the third one to work on. Doing anything else means you're guessing, and guessing what will motivate an employee is worse than playing the lottery." (Lowenthal)

"Ask the employees for feedback on what would make their jobs more fulfilling and motivate them and then show them you care by implementing the ones you can." (Farmer)

"If employees lack motivation, perhaps it is because management stands in the way of creativity, initiative and new opportunities. The most motivating thing they can do is to discover what the de-motivators are, then eliminate whatever they find." (Marshall)

3. Recognize employees' achievements often and openly.

"There are still some supervisors who seem to be pathologically unable to say, 'Thank you,' or 'You did a good job on this.' Being named employee-of-the-month pales as a motivator compared to human-to-human recognition. I focus above on recognition and not on rewards. Rewards are corporate, while recognition is personal. Yes, there are work environments in which all that matters is the relative size of year-end bonuses, but that's not where most people work. The whole person shows up for work, even though you didn't hire the whole person, and you're not paying for the whole person. But you still have to manage the whole person, and that's where recognition comes in." (Rutledge)

4. Promote cross-training, employee growth and ongoing education.

"I'd emphasize giving people the opportunity to grow in some way by giving them more autonomy or responsibility." (Farmer)

“Offer cross-functional and ‘stretch’ assignments for employees who show initiative and want to advance. Make employee development an actual practice in the company, not a slogan. Require that everyone learns continuously formally and informally and measure it. Make learning an important part of what is covered in manager/employee 1-on-1 meetings and annual evaluations.” (Anderson)

5. Help employees focus on the larger perspective, beyond the office walls.

“Link the employee’s work to something bigger and/or outside the company. When employees understand how what they do every day contributes to something bigger (the big picture), they can find this to be motivating.” (Rutledge)

“Tim Rutledge has stolen my response before I could say it (‘Link the employee’s work to something bigger and/or outside the company.’). But that’s OK, because Tim said it better than I would have! So I’ll provide an example in one of many famous Steve Jobs quotations. Back in 1983, Steve was trying to coax John Sculley from Pepsi-Cola to Apple. At the time, Sculley felt that he had a pretty good gig at Pepsi, given his title, comp plan, stock options, and so forth. Sculley told Jobs, ‘No thanks.’ Jobs being Jobs, looked at Sculley in the eye, and said, ‘Do you want to sell sugar water for the rest of your life, or do you want to come with me and change the world?’ In no uncertain terms, Jobs linked Sculley’s work at Apple to something way bigger. The appeal worked, and Sculley went to work for Apple.” (Watson)

6. Forget the stocks, and think outside the box.

“Believe it or not, not all employees understand stock options or want stock options. So, perks, benefits, salary increases and general work environment (like a dog-friendly work place) are necessary.” (Spivak)

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