

Fostering the Work Motivation of Individuals and Teams

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Published as: Clark, R. E. (2003) Fostering the work motivation of individuals and teams. *Performance Improvement*, 42(3), 21-29.

Abstract

Solid evidence supports claims that motivational programs can increase the quality and quantity of performance from 20 to 40 percent. Motivation can solve three types of performance problems: 1) people are refusing to change; and/or 2) allowing themselves to be distracted and not persist at a key task; and/or 3) treating a novel task as familiar, making mistakes but not investing mental effort and taking responsibility because of overconfidence. Everyone is motivated to do or value whatever they believe will make us effective or successful. The challenge is to find ways to support the great variety of different individual and cultural beliefs held by different people about success and what makes them effective at work. However, there are universal demotivators and positive strategies that tend to motivate everyone, despite our different beliefs and values. After describing a number of general strategies for fostering individual motivation, the article focuses on the unique motivational issues faced by teams and how to overcome them.

Introduction

Imagine that 40 percent of the people in your organization decided that from this point on, they would work one extra day a week without an extra day of pay. What impact would their decision have on your organization's bottom line? What is the value of a 20 percent increase in performance by 40 percent of the workforce? Consider Dean Spitzer's (1995) report that in his large scale study of work attitudes, slightly over 50 percent of workers admit that they do only the minimum to avoid being fired. Over 80 percent confess that they could work "much harder". Assuming that you may know some of the 50 percent who do the minimum, and a few of the 80

¹ Some of the ideas presented in this article are taken from Clark, R. E. and Estes, F (2002) *Turning Research into Results: A guide to selecting the right performance solutions*. Atlanta, GA: CEP Press and from Clark, R.E. (1998). Motivating performance. *Performance Improvement*, 37(8), 39-47 and other published and unpublished work by the author. Please address questions or comments to Richard Clark by email to clark@usc.edu.

percent who could work “much” harder, do you think that there is there *anything* that would convince people to work harder than they are now? Yes? Read on.

Is it possible that half of those who admit that they could work much harder might actually decide to increase their performance by 20 percent if they were adequately motivated? The best evidence suggests that highly significant performance increases are possible when motivational strategies are implemented (Clark & Estes, 2002). Stolovitch, Clark and Condly (2002) found that financial incentive programs increase work performance more than 20 percent and the more effective programs produce increases in the 40 percent range. The purpose of this article is to define work motivation, describe a few of the common “de-motivators” found in many organizations and to characterize some of the most successful research-based motivational strategies for individuals and teams.

I. What is Work Motivation?

Work motivation is the process that initiates and maintains goal-directed performance. It energizes our thinking, fuels our enthusiasm and colors our positive and negative emotional reactions to work and life. Motivation generates the mental effort that drives us to apply our knowledge and skills. Without motivation, even the most capable person will refuse to work hard. Motivation prevents or nudges us to convert intention into action and start doing something new or to restart something we’ve done before. It also controls our decisions to persist at a specific work goal in the face of distractions and the press of other priorities. Finally, motivation leads us to invest more or less cognitive effort to enhance both the quality and quantity of our work performance. Thus, motivational performance gaps exist whenever people avoid starting something new, resist doing something familiar, stop doing something important and switch their attention to a less valued task, or refuse to “work smart” on a new challenge and instead use old, familiar but inadequate solutions to solve a new problem (Clark, 1998).

It is crucial to note that motivation does not directly influence work performance. Instead, motivation leads us to use our knowledge and skills and apply them effectively to work tasks. It is the force that initiates, starts, energizes and continues the application of our experience and expertise. Successful performance always involves the cooperation of motivation and knowledge in supportive work environments. Without adequate knowledge, motivation alone does not increase useful performance. Thus adequate motivation is necessary, but not sufficient for effective performance.

Beliefs about what makes us effective cause motivation

After more than a century of research and argument, motivation researchers and practitioners now begin to agree that motivation is the result of our beliefs about what makes us successful and effective. We all value the goals, working conditions and incentives that we believe will contribute to our success. We avoid situations that will prevent us from achieving our goals. For example, money and/or recognition are nearly universal motivators because they are widely perceived as indicators and facilitators of success for many, perhaps most people. Whether we call motivational tools “reinforcement”, “incentives”, “drivers”, “inducements” or by some other quasi-technical name, they only motivate when they are perceived as making us successful or

effective. Conversely, we avoid conditions that we think will delay, inhibit or prevent the attainment of objectives.

The variety problem. What makes motivation a complex issue is that different individuals and groups have very different beliefs about the nature of “success” and about what supports or prevents success. People working in teams may define success differently than when they are working alone. Even very similar people within a culture express a dizzying variety of definitions of “success” and beliefs about the factors that enable and inhibit success so the variety is not only due to our increasingly multi-cultural work force.

One way to think the variety of personality types measured by the Myers Briggs scale, the American Psychological Association’s “Big Five” and many of the other style measures is that they measure our values. Some people value reflective, analytical and organized approaches while others value impulsive, expressive, intuitive reactions. Some people who are confronted with barriers decide to confront and overcome them and others quickly decide to avoid and withdraw and so we have differences in our tendencies to “fight or flee.” Many people work for money and/or recognition and others will work for the sheer joy of doing something well or learning something new. Some of us are very effective at regulating our own motivation by ignoring the de-motivators and creating the conditions that create personal success. All of us depend on coaches and friends for occasional motivational support. Most of us work with different values and styles in different situations. How can we make sense of such breathtaking variety and turn it to our benefit as performance technologists?

The variety solution - universal motivators. In any given situation where we want to increase work motivation, we must determine what will convince people to start doing something new or different, increase their persistence at an important task and invest mental effort. They must believe that the motivator driving their enhanced performance will directly or indirectly contribute significantly to what they need to feel successful and effective. The motivator that works has to cost less than the value of the increased performance and it must meet both ethical and legal requirements. While it might appear that solutions have to be tailored to the different “here and now” demands of individuals, in fact there are more or less universally effective motivators and de-motivators. While organizations may need to tailor these universal motivators and de-motivators for individuals and teams, there are finite number of powerful doable, cost-effective, ethical and legal strategies for increasing work motivation for nearly everyone. The list begins with common organizational practices that have been found to destroy motivation for many people and ways to eliminate them.

II. Common Organizational and Managerial Practices that Destroy Motivation

There are at least five elements of work environments that most researchers agree are the main destroyers of motivation². While a discussion of what kills motivation is a negative exercise, it is critical to emphasize that some very common and popular features of organizations hurt the work motivation of many people who work in them. Changes in the following areas can greatly increase motivation and performance:

² At the end of the article you will find a brief bibliography of “suggested reading” in motivation research and theory.

1) Avoid even the appearance of dishonesty, hypocrisy, and unfairness: Organizations don't have to lie or cheat or be unfair - they only have to be perceived in this way to destroy motivation. Perception is nearly everything in motivation. Managers often feel that they must tell "innocent untruths", refuse to keep promises as work conditions change, or favor their friends. Most of us do not believe that when we do these things we are "lying" or being "hypocritical" or "unfair." People at work are all adults, right? This is the way the world works so get over it! Right? Yet, what we think about our own behavior is much less important than how our behavior is perceived by those around us.

Private perceptions control personal motivation, not publically shared views or generally accepted "reality". When people perceive their treatment as unfair, dishonest or hypocritical, the best we can hope for is that they will act mature, ignore those conditions and work hard despite it all. Yet, even the most mature people are not going to work as hard when they experience dishonest and unfair behavior directed at them personally. Trust is difficult to gain and very easy to lose. It is more typical that organizational dishonesty and unfairness are viewed as an invitation to respond in the same manner (Bandura, 1997). Motivation is enhanced when everyone in an organization avoids even the appearance of unfairness, prejudice, dishonesty or hypocrisy.

2) Discourage vague, impossible and constantly changing performance goals: In the absence of a clear vision leading to well-defined business and performance goals, people substitute their own goals and their goals may not support the organization. Vagueness and inconsistency in a work environment lead most people to assume that "anything goes." Without clear performance goals and feedback, people are not committed to work and are not inclined to give their best effort (Locke and Latham, 2002). Increased work motivation is supported by concrete and challenging work goals that are focused on the near term (today, this week or this month). Everyone should know what they are expected to do this month and next. Conversely, impossible "stretch goals" often damage motivation. The only exception to this rule is when people assume that the organization "could not be serious" and so interpret an impossible goal as instructions to "work harder" (Locke and Latham, 2002). Goals must be challenging and difficult (easy goals are not motivating despite what some people believe) but work goals should not be described in a way that leads people to perceive them as impossible to achieve. The most motivating goals have "3C" qualities: Challenging (but not impossible), Concrete (understandable, measurable) and Current (near term).

3) Eliminate unnecessary rules, policy and work barriers:

Many studies point to the huge variety of arbitrary and seemingly unnecessary rules and cumbersome policies as one of the major de-motivators at work (for example, Spitzer, 1995). It is important to ask about evidence for the benefit of all work rules and what might be lost if they were eliminated. What is gained by rules that people can't talk or eat in certain areas? Why can't people decorate their work space in ways that suit them? Do we have solid evidence beyond our preferences that dress codes are necessary and that they add value to a business? How much of people's behavior must you control to achieve business goals? Even the most competent and personally motivated people tend to quit trying in the face of what they perceive

to be arbitrary barriers. One way to motivate people and simplify organizational work processes is to eliminate all unnecessary, arbitrary rules, policies and procedures.

4) Discourage constant competition with everyone.

Focused competition can be a very motivating experience for some people. Sales people seem to thrive on it and most people who are raised in Western cultural traditions like a bit of it. Yet constant, intense rivalry can support a destructive level of internal competition and focuses attention and energy away from business goals. For example, the U.S. National Academy of Sciences surveyed all of the research on organizational team building strategies (Druckman & Bjork, 1994). The performance improvement methods they surveyed attempted to get members of work teams to bond, collaborate, and work efficiently toward common goals by competing with other teams. When the Academy released its findings, it was not surprising to learn that many of the most popular team-building programs had succeeded in increasing collaboration and cooperation between team members but the teams were competing in a nearly suicidal fashion with other teams in the same organization. This type of misdirected, competitive behavior at work happens in many contexts. Analyze the total system and consider the impact of unintended side effects of encouraging wide-scale competition. Consider the possibility that motivational techniques other than competition might achieve similar or greater results with less risk.

5) Replace negative and/or prejudicial feedback with gap-focused feedback:

Some managers seem to believe that in order to "keep people on their toes" they have to watch carefully until people make a mistake and then jump on them - or remind them of their past mistakes whenever they are acting independently or seem overly satisfied with something they've done. When many people are faced with this kind of feedback, they react with anger or feel depressed and many simply stop trying.

Negative emotion is one of the biggest killers of motivation. A recent international review of performance feedback research studies (Kluger & DiNisi, 1998) found that negative feedback that focused on mistakes actually depressed performance. This happened in one-third of all feedback research studies conducted both in natural settings and in the laboratory. In another third of the studies, vague performance feedback had no impact. In only one-third of the studies did feedback increase performance. Effective performance feedback was focused on describing and closing the gap between goals and current performance. When feedback emphasizes negative qualities of the performer, performance deteriorates. The finding that poor feedback was obvious in two-thirds of all well-planned research studies suggests that it may even be more prevalent in practice since researchers tend to select typical strategies to test in experiments. Motivate people by giving them feedback that begins with a description of what they've accomplished, the goal they were attempting to reach and then discuss ways that the gap between the two can be closed.

III. Three Motivational Strategies that Work For Everyone

Most of the strategies that contribute most to developing motivation are relatively easy to implement and cost very little. The three motivational "push points" that work for everyone are to build realistic levels of self-confidence, positive emotion and effective personal values for work tasks.

1. Help people develop self-confidence in their work skills. A primary motivational goal is to support a high level of personal confidence in everyone's belief about their own ability to achieve their performance goals. People's belief about whether "I have the skills required to succeed at this task" is perhaps the most important factor in our commitment to work tasks and the quality and quantity of mental effort people invest in their work. It is important to focus self confidence on specific types of tasks. There is good evidence that general self-confidence is not as critical for work motivation as is task-specific confidence (Bandura, 1997).

When people lack confidence that they can succeed at a specific goal, they will not choose to tackle that goal. If they have started to work on the goal, they may find a way to convince themselves to switch to less vital tasks, invest very little mental effort or argue about their assignment. If people are overconfident, they will not invest much mental effort in tasks and also not take responsibility when they fail or make mistakes (if people are good at something, they believe that mistakes or failures must have been caused by someone or something else). Everyone needs very high levels of confidence about their job skills. However, if over-confidence turns to arrogance, they are tempted to ignore their mistakes and treat all very novel challenges as if they are routine and familiar.

To help people build self-confidence we must constantly check with them to learn their concerns and what will help them build confidence. The real danger here is that people believe that others are "like us" and so will respond positively to the confidence builders that we prefer. The best assumption is that people are not like us - and that "other people" are most likely to be motivated by very different values than our own - and that "other people's" values are not "wrong or stupid," only different. The most motivating attitude toward other people's values is understanding and respect. We do not have to share values or even agree with other people to respect their right to hold different beliefs and styles. Keep in mind that as confidence increases, commitment to performance goals also increases.

2. Create a positive emotional environment at work. Emotions are usually ignored in discussions about motivation but they are very important. Positive emotions, such as happiness, humor and joy, support and enhance work commitment and negative emotions, such as anger, extreme frustration and depression, kill it. Yet it is not necessary for everyone to be happy in order to be committed. It is more important that people are not excessively unhappy, angry or depressed about work issues. Anger and depression focuses much of our attention on past negative events and not on future goals. The matter seems very straightforward. Organizations will benefit from helping people maintain the level of positive emotion that supports their maximum commitment.

Yet different people sometimes have very different ideas about what helps them have positive emotions or get rid of negative feelings. Even if people were more alike each other, we cannot always do a great deal to modify extremely negative work emotions. Emotions are not always "event based." Some people simply react more quickly than others to routine events they perceive as negative with strong anger or depression due to biological reasons or because of early life experiences. The effort invested in creating a positive, enjoyable work climate can pay off in increased work commitment for many people because the result is less negativity about work.

Gordon Bower (1995) has surveyed the research on the impact of a positive mood on performance. Bower emphasized asking people what would make their work environment more “enjoyable”. His research could be summarized as recommending the following ways to support positive emotions toward work for everyone:

- Engage people in decisions about the esthetic design of their collective workplace. Invest in a bright, lively, positive environmental design. Let people decorate their personal work space (and themselves) if the decoration will not interfere with other people or violate important policy.
- Allow people to listen privately to music while they work if listening does not decrease work efficiency or interfere with others work.
- Eliminate rules and policies that reduce work enjoyment without providing a measured benefit that is greater than the loss of commitment they cause. Ask people what policies, if modified, would increase their enjoyment.
- Encourage everyone, including supervisors and managers, to be enthusiastic, positive, and supportive. Cynical, negative, pessimistic and "sour grape" styles may be fashionable in some organizational cultures, but they do not encourage positive emotion or work commitment.

3. Support the development of strong personal values for performance goals

All of the advice on performance motivation up to this point can be viewed as ways to enhance people's beliefs that if they make a strong commitment and persist at their performance goals, they will become more effective. Personal confidence and emotions are intimately connected with effectiveness beliefs. Our confidence is a measure of our belief about how our own ability or how organizational processes will support (or prevent) our success and effectiveness. Some of our strong emotions are the product of our reasoning and experience about how effective or ineffective we have been and will continue to be in our work environment.

Values are one of the three powerful ways people express their views about what they expect will make them effective (or reduce their effectiveness). People value what they believe helps them, and they reject what they believe stands in their way. Values can be viewed as preferences that lead people to more quickly adopt a course of action and persist in the face of distractions. Of course, different people have different values. Yet research on values and performance suggests that there may be ways to identify types of values and connect them to work goals. The goal here is to increase people's work commitment by suggesting connections between their own values and the benefit of achieving work goals.

IV. Creating value for work.

Eccles and Wigfield (1995) present evidence that most people use three different types of values:

- A) *Interest value*. People will more easily and quickly choose to do what interests them the most. Many people are generally interested in mastering a new skill or adding to their expertise. This more "intrinsic" interest pattern often characterizes the most effective workers. Others are more interested in impressing managers with their capability. This more "performance" oriented style can also be useful under some conditions. It is useful to suggest connections between performance goals and people's natural interests whenever possible. Suggest that their goals represent an opportunity to do something that "interests you" such as master a new area or get a manager's attention.
- B) *Skill value*. Most people seem more willing to do those things that they believe challenge one of their special "skills." So people who see themselves as more analytical like brain teasers and difficult analytical problems and tasks. People who see themselves as more artistic and style conscious like tasks that involve esthetic decisions and design challenges. To support skill value, suggest connections between performance goals and people's special abilities by suggesting that they are "good at this kind of task" and that it is an "opportunity to show your skills in this area";
- C) So much of what we do is chosen not because we love it or can excel at it but because we want the benefits that come when we finish and to avoid the negative consequences of avoiding or delaying. This is called "*utility value*" and it shifts a person's focus from "means" to "ends." It asks people to focus on the benefits of finishing the task and not on their lack of interest or discomfort about the means to reach the end. It is one of the ways we justify enduring something we do not like to get something we do like or avoid something that would be worse. Utility value can be enhanced by describing the realistic benefits of completing a less desired task or goal and the risks of avoiding it. Do not inflate either the benefits or the risks.

Financial incentives that create value. Another highly effective way to increase motivation for work is to provide financial incentives for exceeding past performance. Some question whether offering people pay or gifts tied to exceptional performance actually motivates people beyond the type of strategies we have described above. The overall results of the large body of studies that are published in reputable journals suggest that cash and other tangible incentives can be very powerful and relatively inexpensive ways to increase the value people place on work goals (See the study by Stolovitch, Clark and Condly, 2002 and their references for other similar studies).

To most researchers who study this question, the evidence is clear that financial or other tangible incentives (for example, vacations or luxury gifts) can significantly increase people's work performance by increasing their motivation. For the incentives to provide maximum benefit, the performance level must be very challenging - not routine or easy, but also not perceived as impossible. In much of the research, an "impossible" task is defined as one where the probability of success is less than fifteen percent.

Four types of incentive programs. The four types of incentive programs are:

1) *Quota schemes.* When organizations use a "quota scheme," they appear to get the largest motivational benefit. Quotas offer additional bonus pay for work that exceeds a previous level achieved by the individual, team or organization, or by another organization. Quota schemes seem to give incentives the highest impact on performance;

2) *Piece rate schemes.* The second most effective use of tangible incentives is in "piece rate" schemes where a set amount of output, for example, the manual assembly of one electronics board, is tied to a set rate of pay. Quota and piece rate schemes are often combined to get the benefit of both approaches. In the combined schemes, people have an incentive to do more than simply exceed their past performance - the farther they go, the more they get;

3) *Tournament schemes.* The third ranking incentive approach is "tournament schemes" where pay is linked to performance rankings based on competition between people doing the same job. This plan is often used to motivate sales staff. The factors that are thought to diminish the effects of tournament incentives are the fact that only capable people tend to "play" (those who feel they will not "win" tend to avoid this kind of scheme and so it may attract only top performers and over confident people). Another problem here is that competition sometimes leads to attempts to sabotage the efforts of competitors, thus reducing the overall benefit to the organization. The lack of impact of tournament schemes may be one of the main reasons why competition is not often an effective motivator. Finally,

4) *Flat rate schemes* or fixed pay schemes are the least effective overall. It is ironic that "work for a set salary" is the best example of a flat rate incentive system. Here we pay people for "full time" work, usually pegged at forty hours a week. It is ironic that very few studies have found motivational advantages for the most common tangible incentive system used worldwide.

Disputes about incentive systems: Many of the disputes about pay incentives focus on evidence, drawn largely from studies with children in classrooms, that our personal interest in work tasks decrease when tangible incentives are used to reward work. The argument is that paying people to do what they would do because of they are interested in the job, switches their motivation away from a fascination with the task, to the pay they are promised for performance. In the future, the argument goes, people who are paid more for interesting work, will work for extra pay and not because they are interested. The best advice is not to provide tangible incentives to people who are already achieving business goals without tangible rewards, unless there is an excellent financial reason to exceed business goals at the possible risk of future "interest" motivation. The best evidence is that giving cash or other tangible incentives to adults for increased work actually increases people's interest in their jobs (Stolovitch, Clark & Condly, 2002) but may decrease the interest of some children in studying and school work (Pintrich & Schunk, 2001).

V. Team Motivation

To this point, the discussion has emphasized motivational strategies that work for nearly everyone or that can be translated to work with different people. Yet most people work in teams some of the time and it appears that when we are in teams, we must consider additional motivational issues. Al Bandura (1997) has devoted a considerable part of his career studying ways to motivate people who work in groups. He has a great deal of evidence from many field and laboratory-based studies, that team motivation includes two or three additional concerns.

Two key features of team motivation - expertise and collaboration. When people work in teams they encounter two issues that can either help or hinder their team spirit and motivation; first is their belief about whether other team members have the variety of skills and knowledge necessary to achieve team goals; and, second is their expectation about whether the team will collaborate effectively to get the job done. When teams are composed of people with different but compatible skills, member concerns about the expertise of their team colleagues is critical to team motivation. Each member of the team has to be viewed as able to make her/his own contribution to team goals. When people doubt that one or more of their team members are competent and when they believe that the capabilities of the other members are necessary to get the job done, motivation suffers dramatically. Enhancing team motivation therefore requires that team members must be encouraged to have confidence in each other's ability and if that confidence is damaged, it must be repaired quickly and effectively. Directly confronting the confidence issue is recommended if the questioned member has expertise that is not appreciated. If expertise is lacking or questionable, team members may have to be replaced. The best way to prevent this problem is to address it carefully when teams are selected.

Even when teams trust each others' expertise, team members may doubt that the team can work together effectively. Since collaboration is an essential requirement for team success, uncooperative, highly independent but talented players can wreck team motivation by refusing to work effectively with other members. One solution here is to avoid assigning highly independent people to work in collaborative teams.

Social loafing in teams. Team members who refuse to carry their weight also challenge team motivation. This phenomenon is called "social loafing". Some team members seem to think that when they work collectively, they do not need to work as hard. Social loafing has been the subject of performance research since the turn of the century. Early studies examined how much force individuals used to pull on a rope when asked to "pull as hard as possible". After each person's average pull force was noted, teams of two, three, and more people were asked to "pull together." In every case, when additional people were added to the rope, each individual seemed to pull a bit less forcefully.

Correcting social loafing through individual assessment. The "loafing" effect can be eliminated very quickly and effectively with one strategy. When we assess the individual contribution of each member of a team, whether they are pulling a rope or designing a new product, social loafing disappears (see Clark & Estes, 2002, for a discussion of this research). Thus, another crucial support for team motivation is to inform team members that the organization will assess the individual contributions of each member of every team rather than only assessing the achievement of the entire team.

VI. Conclusions

At the beginning of this article, you were asked to consider the cost and benefit of increasing work commitment and mental effort in your organization by about 20 to 40 percent. Many of the gaps between current performance and the levels required to achieve business goals are caused by a lack of motivation, not a lack of knowledge and skills. Motivation was described as the energy that drives us to use our expertise, choose to do what we must to achieve work goals, persist in the face of other priorities and distractions and to invest maximum mental effort to succeed.

The goal of this article was to describe some of the most important motivational problems and solutions for individuals and teams. If you've been thinking about cost as you read, you will agree that very few of the recommendations for these newer motivational approaches cost very much. Even the "tangible" (gifts, cash) incentive programs described can be very cost effective when used properly. Most of the newer motivation builders ask organizations to foster a culture where fair and positive beliefs, expectations and practices are encouraged in an environment where people are challenged to work hard. The objective of adopting a more positive motivational climate is to increase individual and team confidence, interpersonal and organizational trust, collaborative spirit, optimism, positive emotions and values about work. The benefit of achieving a more motivated organization is in increased persistence at work tasks a higher quality of mental effort invested in work goals.

Motivation influences people's decision to actively choose to do a job task and to persist at that task over time until it is completed. This "buy in" activity is critical when people are overloaded with work and are constantly multi-tasking. When "buy in" breaks down or fails to occur on tasks that must be completed for business goals to be achieved, the resulting gap can be closed by using some of the techniques suggested in this article. Another motivational problem that must be tracked is a "confidence" issue. When people have adequate knowledge and skills yet still make mistakes and cannot correct them, they most likely are either under confident or overconfident. Building appropriate confidence is also essential for maximum motivation.

Team motivation was described as having three additional issues beyond those things that motivate individuals. Team members must believe that their team partners have the separate skills needed to achieve team goals and that everyone will collaborate effectively to get the job done. They also must believe that everyone on the team will invest their best effort and not "loaf" and rely on others to do their work. Assessing the contributions of every member of a team eliminates loafing. Beliefs about expertise and collaboration are the first factors that should be investigated if team motivation is contributing to a performance gap.

Finally, it is useful to keep in mind that the root of all human motivation seems to be our beliefs and expectations about what makes us successful and effective. We all value what we believe helps us and we all avoid whatever we believe prevents or does not help us achieve our personal goals. The huge variety of motivational strategies all serve the same powerful end - a positive adjustment in the way we value ourselves, our goals and the people and activities that help us achieve our goals.

Suggested Readings on Work Motivation

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