



# A Guide to Employee Motivation for Public Human Resource Managers

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**Abstract:** *In the current economic and fiscal climate, the public sector is facing increasing demands from the citizenry to produce more with less. One way human resource managers can accomplish this objective is to ensure employees are motivated. This paper acts as a guide to employee motivation for public human resource managers. It briefly discusses the impact of motivation on performance before explaining how managers can effectively increase employee motivation.*

The public sector is in the midst of one of its most difficult times in decades. In the aftermath of the worst economic collapse since the Great Depression, thousands upon thousands of people have lost their jobs. The public sector has been hit particularly hard by this recession, as it is continuing to shed jobs while the private sector makes slow gains. In addition, many still fear another recession is on the horizon, which would cut the government's revenue substantially. Lastly, the public is putting increasing pressure on the government to bring down the national debt. All of these factors combine to compel human resource managers to do more with less. In order to do this, public sector employees will need to become more efficient; one of the best ways leadership and management can make employees more efficient is by ensuring employees are properly motivated. A good starting point for a discussion on motivation is defining motivation and its importance. Then, ways to motivate employees can be considered.

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Finally, a best practice for public human resource managers to use to get the most motivation out of their employees will be synthesized.

While people generally know what motivation is and believe motivation to be important, academics and managers alike have done an excellent job of defining motivation and explaining its significance in the workplace. Sher Kamali and colleagues from Gomal University in Pakistan discussed some of the many definitions of motivation before forming their own; “Motivation is the need or drive within an individual that drives him or her toward goal-oriented action” (Kamali et al., 2009, p. 2). James Lindner, a research associate at Ohio State University, proposes motivation is “the inner force that drives individuals to accomplish personal and organizational goals” (Lindner, 1998, para.7). Stating the importance of motivation, Kirti Rajhans, an assistant professor at the National Institute of Construction Management and Research in India, states, “a motivated employee is a valuable asset which delivers immense value to the organization” (Rajhans, 2012, p. 81). Kerry Webb of Texas Women’s University also points out highly motivated employees are less likely to skip work and are more productive while on the job compared to their unmotivated counterparts (Webb, 2007).

After examining what motivation is and why it is vital toward organizational success, it is now logical to examine what some managers and academics say about motivation. One common topic of discussion is the role of communication and trust between managers and employees. The general consensus among professionals and researchers alike is communication and trust between employees and management are absolutely vital aspects to any employee motivation program. There are two facets of communication and trust to explore; the first is relationship building.

Building a relationship with each employee is not only personally satisfying but it also can serve two other purposes. First, it allows an employer to find out what motivates each employee. Kamery boldly states, “The key to motivating employees is realizing not all employees are the same...In order to achieve motivation managers must know each employee” (Kamery, 2004, p.139). Carter McNamara of Authenticity Consulting suggests asking each employee to fill out a list of the five things that motivate her the most and having the manager fill out a list of what she thinks motivates that employee. Then, the employee and manager should get together in a one-on-one environment and compare the lists. This gives the manager a chance to get to know what motivates the employee and why (McNamara, n.d.). By knowing what motivates each employee, managers can use rewards and incentives more effectively and efficiently to get the most effort out of each employee.

The second purpose of building a relationship with employees is to build trust. Kamery alludes to the importance of trust when he states that employees “want and need to be able to trust their leaders and know that what the leader tells them is true. It is important for supervisors to have integrity and to earn the trust of their employees” (Kamery, 2004, p.140). Kay Martin, director of the Lebanon Public Library in Lebanon, Indiana, explains, “Trust is everything. If your employees do not have trust in you, there is no way you can motivate them to work harder” (personal communication, July 6, 2012). By having one-on-one conversations with employees about both work and home life, a manager can gain genuine trust by showing she cares, which creates an environment where motivation can thrive.

The second facet of trust and communication is clarifying goals and expectations to the employee. As Dr. Dan Strakal of Dan Strakal and Success Positioning Systems explains, “Knowing exactly what is expected has a powerful motivating effect on most individuals” (Strakal, 2006, p. 4). Kamali et al argue that fully explaining expectations is an effective way to

avoid a demotivator, saying a lack of motivation is often caused by poorly communicated goals and expectations (Kamali et al, 2009). Martin echoes this line of thinking: “When I fail to properly communicate a task to an employee, the task often does not get done, the employee gets frustrated, and their productivity in their job tends to decrease” (personal communication, July 6, 2012). Certainly, to ensure a motivated workforce free of demotivators, it is important that managers clearly express goals and expectations to their employees.

Another topic often discussed is the impact wages have on an employee’s motivation. While there has been much research on the topic, there is little consensus. For instance, Annalisa Cristini of the University of Bergamo finds while wages play a large role in employee retention, they do not have an impact on motivation (Cristini, 2011). Lindner’s (1998) findings directly conflict with Cristini’s; his work shows good wages is the second highest motivator for workers. Further complicating the issue is McNamara’s assertion that a good wage is a way to keep employees from getting less motivated, but that it does not motivate them further.

Rewards are another topic widely discussed in research. Kamery believes in the power of pay-for-performance programs, stating they “can be highly rewarding since they positively relate the amount of pay with the amount of work effort” (Kamery, 2004, p. 142-143). He also discusses The Idea Program, also known as TIP, in which employees submit cost-saving ideas to a committee. If the committee decides to use the idea, the employee is given a monetary reward and is recognized at a company function (Kamery, 2004). McNamara believes rewarding based on an individual’s motivators is important, but doing so will lose benefit if it is not done immediately. He advises rewarding exemplary behavior as soon as possible because it signals to the employee that the behavior is highly preferred and appreciated.

Finally, working conditions are widely recognized as having a strong impact on worker motivation. One aspect of this notion involves the level of decision-making that employees are given within their jobs. Kamery (2004) recommends giving employees a chance to make decisions impacting what job they do and how they go about doing it; furthermore, he highlights the motivational possibilities of job enlargement and enrichment. Kamery explains that job enlargement involves increasing employees’ knowledge and training, while job enrichment calls for an increase in employee responsibility and a decrease in direct supervision. When executed properly, this can lead to a “higher quality of output and employee motivation since workers feel connected to their jobs” (Kamery, 2004, p. 141). Lindner (1998) finds the best motivator is having interesting work. Cristini agrees with Kamery’s ideas and Lindner’s belief in the importance of interesting work, stating that “greater job autonomy, greater discretion, reduced supervision and reduced repetitiveness can enhance both the sense of belonging and the attachment to the organization” (Cristini, 2011, p. 18).

After examining what motivation is, why it is important, and different opinions on the best ways to enhance employee motivation, a general “best practice” can be described. The creation of the best practice will come from professional and academic opinions discussed thus far. Ultimately, a best practice in motivation involves successfully building trust, making the job and associated tasks more enjoyable, and rewarding properly.

Building trust is absolutely vital to ensuring high levels of motivation among workers. If employees lack trust in the manager and leadership, they will also lack motivation in their jobs. There are many ways to build trust, the most personal of which is building relationships with employees. Managers need to set time to have one-on-one conversations with their employees about both work and non-work related topics. These meetings will allow employees to know the manager on a more personal level and will make them feel like the manager genuinely cares

about them, thus building trust. Another way to build trust is to allow employees to participate in the decision-making process. Employees often have a different perspective on the organization and may be able to offer valuable insight. This makes the employee feel her opinion is valued and important, which makes her trust leadership more. Managers must also ensure they treat employees fairly. Impartial treatment of workers entails everything from rewarding them equitably, paying fair wages, disciplining employees equitably, and even the way managers talk to employees. If workers see leadership as unfair or inequitable, they will lose motivation. Lastly, providing feedback is essential to motivation. Workers need to know if they are doing tasks properly or if they need to change what they are doing. A lack of feedback can lead the employee to get frustrated or believe the manager simply does not care what she does, both of which will ultimately lead to a loss of motivation. If organizational leaders can act upon these notions, they will be one step closer to a motivated workforce.

Another way to increase motivation is to make the job more enjoyable. It is hard to get motivated for a dull job, but, fortunately, there are many ways managers can liven up the work. One way to make jobs more fun is to reduce repetitiveness. Managers should try to give employees new and challenging tasks when possible so the employee does not get bored with her everyday tasks. Giving employees more education and/or job training allows them to learn new and valuable means of bettering their job performance and skill set; it could also potentially increase their understanding of the organization and improve the likelihood of promotion in the future. Furthermore, it gives employees new opportunities and perspectives on their position and the organization as a whole, which makes the job enjoyable.

Another way to make job tasks more fun is to allow employees to make decisions on how they go about doing their daily work. This will allow the employee to do tasks in the way that works best for them. Lastly, managers must communicate expectations clearly. Without clear communication of tasks and expectations, employees often get frustrated trying to figure out what they are supposed to be doing. This unnecessary confusion leads to a decrease in motivation. If managers can transform workers' jobs from a boring task necessary to make a living into something the employees actually enjoy, motivation will skyrocket.

Rewarding properly is the final way in which managers can motivate workers. This entails being fair in the distribution of rewards, rewarding behaviors soon after they happen, knowing what motivates each employee, and paying fair wages. Managers who are not fair and equitable in their distribution of rewards will lose trust from their employees which will result in a loss of motivation. In addition, employees' motivations will decrease when they feel that their efforts will not impact their rewards, giving them no reason to work harder. It is also important for managers to reward positive behaviors immediately. This will signal to the employee that the action is correct and greatly appreciated, which will motivate her to continue the behavior. Another way to reward employees properly is to know what motivates them. Some employees may be most motivated by money, while others may desire recognition or new job tasks. By getting to know the employee through one-on-one conversations or by simply asking the employees what motivates each of them, managers can tailor rewards to individual employees. Such personalized rewards are more desirable for the employees, which motivates them to work harder to attain these rewards.

Finally, while there is no consensus on how wages impact motivation, employers must pay fair wages. Any employee who observes a large disparity between his salary and that of another employee in the same organization is likely to lose motivation. If an employee notices her position in a different organization pays much more, she will lose motivation to continue

working in her current organization. Thus, while wages may or may not act as a motivating factor, they can certainly cause a loss of motivation. When rewards are distributed fairly, given soon after a positive behavior, tailored to the individual employee, and wages are fair and equitable, the workforce becomes much more motivated.

As the public sector continues to face budget cuts and increasing pressure to lower costs, human resource managers must find ways to get more productivity out of each employee. While giving employees better technology and giving them more resources to do the job in an efficient manner could certainly help, this alone will likely not be enough. Motivating employees could go a long way to bridging the gap between the productivity demanded by the public and the capabilities of public sector workers. After considering advice from academics and managers alike, it is clear that building trust, making jobs more enjoyable, and rewarding properly, are all vital to motivation. If public human resource managers can find a way to do each of these things, they will have a happier, more motivated, and more productive workforce.

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