

Is demotivation the new motivation of employee engagement?

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If you want to start engaging your employees, stop motivating them. Please. The reason they're not performing at peak has less to do with motivation and more to do with de-motivation.

Motivation is simplistic

It used to be so simple. Employee morale went down. Incentives went up. Performance went down. Punishment and rewards went up. You know, the old carrot and stick approach to employee motivation. It worked a charm. Or did it? The problem is that it was so simple or, rather, too simplistic. It assumed, rather than understood, what motivated people to get up and go go go. [Susan Fowler](#) has a theory based on years of research into the science of motivation. She believes that, *"People are always motivated. The question is not if, but why they are motivated."* She even wrote a book about it: ["Why motivating people doesn't work and what does: The new science of leading, energizing and engaging."](#)



Motivation is a complicated science

The truth is motivation is a complicated science that needs to be unpacked, not boxed up and packaged as the elixir that keeps employee engagement alive and peppy. How often do your motivational programmes unpack where all this employee motivation is supposed to be coming from? Is it driven by ego or generated by values? Or both? At different times? And by different people? And then there's the small difference between motivation that is born of *choosing* something versus *having* to do something. On top of that we should add the naïve assumption that motivation is something you either have or don't have and that more of it is always better because highly motivated employees reach more targets and achieve more goals. Whew. That's a lot of pressure to put on one simple solution to probably the most valuable of all Human Capital puzzles – how to engage employees. It's no wonder the idea of motivation as the sole driving force behind employee engagement has reached peak performance anxiety. So, let's take some pressure off by focusing on the facts at hand.

Fact. Employee engagement is still a top priority for many if not most organisations.

Fact. Employee performance and staff morale is a common challenge across industries and organisations.

Fact. Motivation is an internal process that is influenced by many and varied external factors.

The problem is not that motivated people don't perform better and engage more. They do. The problem is that

understanding how, when and why something motivates one person and not the other is a complex science that requires a multipronged approach that falls beyond the limited scope of most reward based, incentive driven motivational programmes.

There is a simpler and more effective way to engage your employees. This is where we toss the coin to reveal the flip side of motivation. Yes, that's right – demotivation.

How are you demotivating your employees?

Remember how we said that motivation is an internal process influenced by external factors? Which one do you think you have a better chance of changing? The external factors or the internal processes? Now you get it. You could probably write down at least 10 external factors that are demotivating your employees right now. Yes, some of them may be reward driven, like salary raises and performance bonuses, but we bet many of them aren't.

Three factors that decrease engagement, no matter how motivated your employees are:

1. Toxic work environment

We hardly have to elaborate on this one. It's quite obvious and well documented why employees are only as motivated as their environments are supportive. Clean up the pond before you wash off the fish. That's the motto here.

2. Poor leadership style

What's the point? Is that what your employees are saying? If your employees have come to expect their ideas to be shut down and their performance to put down, you need to question the leadership style at work and the motivation it is crushing.

3. Lack of employee investment

Employees cannot succeed if they are not given the support, skills and resources required to perform their duties, let alone go above and beyond them. It's obvious, but essential.

There is also another upside to not focusing all your energy and attention on employee motivation. It frees you up to focus on the underlying motivation for motivation itself – performance. So, instead of simply putting the gap between ability and performance down to a lack of individual motivation, you can spend more time, budget and energy diagnosing these gaps and creating a performance system that addresses the bigger issues and serves the bigger picture.

Such a system should take into account:

Expectation: define performance requirements and timeframes

Make sure each employee knows and understands the desired output and their individual role in making it happen within agreed timeframes.

Enablement: the right tools and resources

Make sure your teams have the right tools and resources at hand to enable them to achieve the desired outcome in the required timeframe.

Improvement: create platforms for feedback

Feedback should never be limited to annual performance reviews and award citations. Where possible, feedback should be instantaneous, easily accessible and take into account both performance-and value-based indicators.

Consistency: offer incentives and rewards

Incentives and rewards are still an important part of employee performance. The trick is to make sure that these recognise the right behaviours and reward teams in a way that is meaningful to them. Not to you.

Yes, it's time to take the pressure off motivation as the driving force behind employee engagement and start looking at what is demotivating your teams and how you can shift these in a way that influences their behaviour and, ultimately, their performance.

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