



Leading and motivating: mastering potential

Philip Atkinson

It is often said that people are an organisation's greatest asset.

Introduction

By failing to create a high-performance team-driven culture and capturing the potential of their people, many organisations never achieve their true potential. This huge waste in terms of energy, enthusiasm, commitment and drive can be radically reduced by focusing on inspiring staff to move beyond their comfort zone and commit to optimal performance. This module is about developing the strategies to achieve this goal.

Strategies for maximising human potential

In many businesses, we as managers and coaches fail to motivate people to achieve their full potential. The true financial cost of failing to motivate and maximise the potential of our staff is billions of pounds each year in terms of wasted energy, enthusiasm displayed but never tapped, and many opportunities for improvement that are simply lost. This is most critical in labour-

intensive industries and businesses where the salary bill comprises almost 50 per cent of the costs of running the business. We will explore the Motivation Grid (see Figure 1), to which you can adhere and which will provide you with clear strategies to maximise the potential of your most important asset or resource – your people.

Imagine the business belongs to you

Now, imagine that the business in which you work belongs to you – the salaries and wages now come from your own pocket. Let's assume that, as your business expands and customer loyalty improves, the resultant success is reflected in increased profits, personal gain and satisfaction. Now consider the converse: that if the service you offer is less than attractive – resulting in poor levels of customer retention – this will result in a contraction in your business, significant personal loss and perhaps even business failure and bankruptcy. Bearing these two

scenarios in mind, ask yourself the following questions that relate to motivation and leadership:

- Would you manage people differently if their performance had a direct impact on your personal circumstances?
- What current organisational and managerial issues, if resolved, could result in substantial business improvement?

The answers to these questions are extremely important and speak volumes about personal motivation and leadership. Every manager should occupy a coaching role, whether with direct reports or across the organisation. It is my firm belief that anyone who manages others or has a critical role in the supply chain is a leader, and their principal role is to enable others to contribute their best and learn new ways of behaving. The manager has to develop learning and motivational strategies to maximise the contribution of everyone, as if the organisation belonged to all.

could include newly promoted people, or staff who have changed their job and are ill-prepared to deal with their new role. Perhaps they are running projects across the organisation, but have no cross-organisation or project-management skills.

They may realise that they need to develop new skills and abilities, but find that there is a conflict between the time needed to learn new skills and the time needed to do the job. The result is they have to learn on the job, which can be extremely frustrating. One of the most powerful stressors in modern life is probably failure to prepare people for a change in their role. The abilities to do a new job or fulfil a new role well do not materialise by magic.

If time is invested in new shoots, they will flourish. If it is not, they may revert to the limits of their technical or operational background. If they are totally neglected, they will fall into the question marks area, and will probably display little interest in their job. They may well stay in it because they cannot find anything else, probably performing to a minimum standard only.

Ninety-eight per cent of people come to work to do a good job

At this stage, people who manage others must realise that the skills and motivations displayed by their team are a reflection of their management style. No one wants to be seen as question marks or new shoots. I believe that happens to people because others fail to clarify expectations, and then fail to resource the required development. I believe the vast majority of people come to work to do a good job.

The backbone

These people have extensive experience which takes them outside their technical comfort zone. They have stretched and work across boundaries. They have learnt to do things in different ways, and probably to work with others from different areas. They may never be real high performers, but they are dependable, trustworthy and an asset to the business and their colleagues. How they have developed is of high value, and if developed further they could move up to the high flyer quadrant.

There are too many organisations where there is a plethora of such people in this quadrant. That indicates that the organisation is not really moving forward, but just doing the same old stuff. To move on and compete in the future requires some new beliefs, confidence that people can learn more, that they can be developed, that there is a host of experience which is part of them that could be used more effectively.

The high flyers

These people are excellent at what they do. Being a high flyer can relate to any position, whether clerical or middle management, or in any function in a business. High flyers have perfected their ability to work with others and constantly look for challenges in what they do. All staff have the potential to become real high flyers in everything they do.

Philip Atkinson is director of Learning Strategies Ltd, specialising in strategic, behavioural and cultural change. He is a consultant in the UK, Europe and United States, has written six business books and published many articles, speaks at conferences and runs workshop sessions. His latest book is *How to become a Change Master: Real World Strategies for Achieving Change* (Spiro Press, spring 2005).

- Telephone: +44 (0) 0131 346 1276
- Website: www.philipatkinsonconsulting.com

The term 'high flyers' does not suggest an elite group; it refers to being all you can be. The grid and the four quadrants are specific to a current job or role, and it is the job of managers to resource and support the organisation, getting all their staff into this quadrant.

The determining factor in whether this is achieved is how well the organisation values its people, and how effective the direct action coming from managers is in causing this to happen, creating an excellent organisation.

Summary

It is critical that organisations, both in the public and the private sector, take note of these issues. Mastering the potential of their people means mastering the potential of the business.

People bring a host of talents, experiences, aptitudes, competencies and attitudes to their business each day. I believe we probably only tap 50 per cent of their potential, the other 50 per cent being wasted. Often it is expressed elsewhere, probably when pursuing activities outside full-time employment.

It is the responsibility of the person who manages people to get the most from them, but this can only be done with top-team commitment. That says much about the creation of a dominant, positive and deliberate motivating leadership style.



Inspire staff to move beyond their comfort zone

What interests do the people you employ have outside work?

Understanding the motivational drive of all staff who work with you and seeing each individual as a whole person are critical to maximising potential.

My experience is that people develop certain skills in context, and frequently apply those skills solely or mostly in context-specific situations. For instance, a member of a speakers' forum will seek to improve their methods of communication and influence by attending weekly sessions – applying and improving techniques all the time. But, back in the workplace, in normal working hours, if these skills are not applied or practised they remain untapped. How can we as an organisation make best use of this person's talents?

Often a member of staff will have little opportunity to expand their horizon of activities at work. Yet they may have a great need to take charge and influence events. It is not uncommon to find that many people

with quite junior roles in business do some volunteering and take on quite formidable responsibilities with social or charitable bodies. Some run their own businesses on a part-time basis, and others pursue advanced educational qualifications and take on professional roles in other organisations. I talked with a call-centre operative who was also the director of a voluntary organisation committed to community welfare issues. The talents she displayed in that role – organising voluntary and unpaid staff, managing a tight budget, winning support from the local community and negotiating for funds with local and central government agencies – was probably never applied to, tested in, or thought relevant to her paid employment. What a waste of talent and experience – her employers knew little of her achievements outside her normal work.

Audit staff to assess their experience and knowledge

What experience and knowledge have people acquired when working in other environments that will help us

shape our business? Working with a very large sales organisation in the Insurance business, I asked how often the company benchmarked the practice of their key competitors. A fairly non-committal response indicated they never did this. We immediately set up a team of sales staff, and examined the following:

- What training was given to staff on joining the business?
- Who provided the training and what were the key issues, products and markets on which attention was focused?
- What models were used to conceptualise the 'how to sell' process?

- What closing techniques were used?
- To what sales guru did they attribute their sales model, and what techniques were most powerful?
- How were sales organised in other companies? Was it by region, type of customer or product?
- How were people managed; what was the span of control?
- What were the emerging issues for competitors' sales staff to address in the next six months?

When working through this process, the sales team had very little work to do in terms of having to go outside their immediate circle of colleagues. That was simply because many of the larger team had worked for competitors and knew the systems, processes and techniques used on a day-to-day basis. On investigation, it was found that many sales staff even had copies of training manuals they had used in previous jobs that emphasised development activities. All this was very powerful for the business, and the information was free. It just had to be accessed.

Much information was currently available, but hidden from view because no one had asked the right questions. The power of questions is that they will generate untold returns. In this example, because staff were constrained by their proximity to their most recent experience or job, they failed to appreciate that much of what competitors are doing may work for them as well.

Just answering simple questions unlocks a powerful process, leading to understanding that we can do much more to capture the potential of our staff. What we need to do is to start looking at what staff could achieve if they were developed to move beyond their current capabilities and experience.

You get the staff you deserve

We shall use the Motivation Grid to assess the health of the organisation with regard to how people are motivated and led. There are some key issues that need to be resolved. That will enable us to understand the importance of mastering the potential of staff and of highlighting issues of motivation and leadership.

Here follows an analysis that can be conducted on the organisational, functional, departmental or team level. Before using this analysis, it is important to be clear that people behave or function as they do primarily because of the way they are led, motivated and managed – or not, as may be the case.

To assess current performance, first decide on the area for assessment. You may want to rely on your judgement, using a 0 to 10 scale – with 10 very high and 0 low. The vertical scale should run up the page from bottom to top. Now

compare your findings against a similar assessment of future potential. You will have to make some subjective assessments, making use of your experience and judgement. Now you have two coordinates, and you will be able to plot each team on the grid. This is a very simple and also a subjective assessment. Remember that we are not judging the people themselves, but assessing the action we need to take to allow them to develop beyond the confines of how they are currently being motivated and led.

The important thing is to reappraise the strategies you can adopt to unlock the potential of your people. That has to be through leadership. The majority of people come to work to do a great job – liberate them from the leadership and motivation strategies that inhibit them from achieving this.

Question marks

'Question marks' is an unfortunate term, which implies that a person may be performing below requirements and that a question mark hangs over their potential for the future. I firmly believe that you get the staff you deserve. If you fail to motivate, you get unmotivated staff. If you have identified a sizeable number of such staff in this

category, why are they here and why has action not been taken before? What steps need to be taken to ensure that everyone in the teams satisfies at least the basic criteria for the job?

There are a variety of issues that must be debated. Does the team have the requisite administrative or technical knowledge but lack other skills? What specifically lets them down? What can you do now to help them meet the criteria for acceptable performance?

If the individual fits in the lower left-hand quadrant of the Motivation Grid, there is a need to explore why. What are the perceptions of others? What are the criteria that would indicate why they are in this position?

Note that this kind of analysis is important for all four positions of the grid.

New shoots

The new shoots are usually people who have moved to new positions, or whose role has changed, but they may not have changed. For instance, these people may not realise that they can no longer depend solely upon technical or specialist capabilities. They may be lost in their role and they may not survive the transition. They

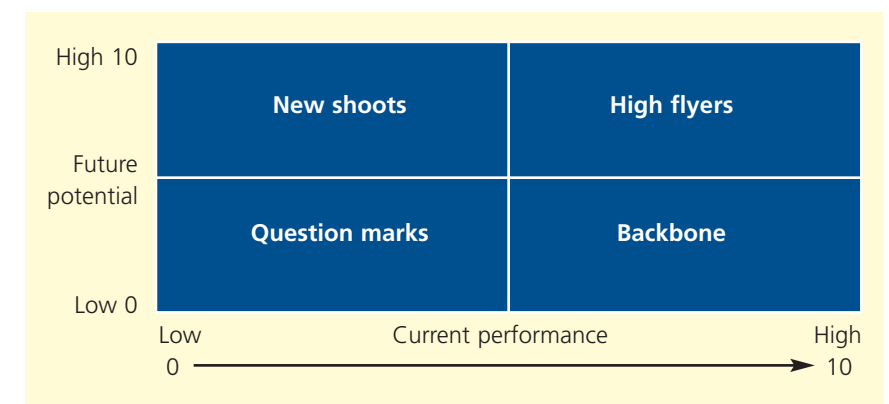


Fig. 1: Motivation Grid