

Ways to Unlock Your Employees

In order to maximise employees' levels of performance, HR professionals must know the essential principles to unlock their potential. This article tells you what the four principles are.

by **Farzana Aslam**

“Our people are our most important asset” is a ubiquitous phrase in the corporate world. But how many organisations truly get the best return on their most important asset? If employees are the most important asset to your business, it follows that a level of investment is required in order to ensure that those assets perform to the best of their potential. What exactly this investment should look like may differ to a degree between different organisations, but some basic principles are universally applicable.

Principle 1: Know what motivates your people

The starting point in knowing how to engage employees to give their best performance lies in knowing what motivates them. Research conducted by the psychologist Fredrick Herzberg back in 1968 identified a direct correlation between an employee's motivation to improve his/her performance and his/her levels of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction.¹ The study revealed

that certain characteristics of a job are consistently related to job satisfaction, whilst others related to job dissatisfaction.

According to Herzberg, if an organisation sets about eliminating dissatisfying job factors, it may reduce dissatisfaction. But it will not, by itself, create the level of job satisfaction required to motivate employees to improve performance. Applying the findings of this theory into the workplace requires an organisation to embark upon a two-stage process: first, it has to work on eliminating dissatisfaction factors and secondly, it has to focus on satisfaction factors like giving its employees achievement, recognition, responsibility, and opportunities for growth and development (Table 1).

Putting Principle 1 into practice requires managers to examine the jobs carried out by their team members to determine how they be made more rewarding and more satisfying to the person doing the work, an exercise Herzberg termed “job enrichment”. The central focus of job enrichment is to expand the tasks and the corresponding

skill set that someone performs in their day-to-day role. The idea is to identify tasks which an employee will find more stimulating and interesting or which add variety, challenge or control over their work. One easy way to achieve this is to delegate to an employee a task ordinarily carried out by their manager.

Principle 2: Understand the diversity of your people

The key to applying Principle 1 is to understand that not all employees will be motivated by the same thing. Organisations too readily assume that people are motivated by money alone. As long as employees continue to receive attractive salary increases or bonuses,

Employees' Performance Potential



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they will be incentivised to remain with the organisation and be inspired enough to give their best performance at work. However, as will be noted from the study referred to above, salary is a factor which can lead to dissatisfaction with a job, but it will not necessarily have a corresponding impact upon an employee's motivation to improve his or her performance.

Principle 2 is recognising that different things make people of different genders, nationalities, religions, and ages want to work for and remain at a company. Moreover, all employees have different values, ambitions, and expectations. These may vary widely between locations. For example, a new graduate recruit working in China may

Table 1 Employees' satisfaction and dissatisfaction factors

Factors for Satisfaction	Factors for Dissatisfaction
Achievement	Company policy
Recognition	Supervision
Work itself	Relationship with manager and peers
Responsibility	Work conditions
Advancement	Salary
Growth	Security

value and be motivated by different things than a long-serving employee working in Hong Kong, such as opportunities for training and development or overseas assignments.

Putting Principle 2 into practice requires managers to speak with their team members on a one-to-one basis. This should happen regularly. Truly effective managers know what is going on in the lives of their employees, so that, for

example, if an employee is about to have a child, job security and flexible work hours are likely to be more important to him/her than opportunities for international travel. Once a manager understands what motivates individual team members, he or she is able to design jobs that motivate by allocating roles and responsibilities in a way which will enhance an employee's enjoyment of his or her job.

Principle 3: Make every employee count

Every employee within an organisation has the potential to improve his/her performance. However, there is a temptation within many organisations to focus on rewarding its top performers, not only from a financial perspective through salary increases and bonuses, but also in the field of training and development, including on-the-job-training. Failing to give sufficient recognition to the contribution of other performers within an organisation results in an organisation failing to tap into a vast pool of talent (by definition, the majority of its employees), some of whom may have the potential to become top performers. Looked at another way, those that are not currently top performers are those with the most potential to improve!

Principle 3 requires organisations to follow up on their initial investment in the recruitment of an employee by ensuring that each employee has a clear development path enabling them to succeed and develop within the organisation.

Putting Principle 3 into practice requires managers to regularly review development goals and actions for all team members in order to identify each team member's development needs. Ideally discussions of this nature should be conducted outside of the framework of the annual performance review process to allow a frank and honest dialogue around performance and development issues. Managers then need to identify ways of implementing those development goals and needs through action. This can be achieved through a variety of on-the-job and off-the-job opportunities. On-the-job opportunities can include the allocation of stretch assignments, mentoring, job

shadowing, job rotations (this can be very motivating for people in jobs that are very repetitive or that focus on only one or two skills), and participative management (allowing employees to get involved in strategic planning and decision making). If people think that their ideas are valued and make a difference, they are more likely to be invested in and motivated to produce a successful outcome. Off-the-job opportunities can include participation in internal or external training and development courses targeted at either technical skills (such as IT skills or languages) or personal effectiveness skills (such as management and leadership

skills). Other examples are assigning an employee a coach, or giving an employee the opportunity to network with clients or meet senior management through external events such as volunteer days or executive lunches.

Principle 4: Manage engagingly

Numerous studies have shown that the managers have a disproportionate impact upon employee engagement through performance.² One of the most recent studies conducted by the UK's Institute for Employment Studies³ was aimed at understanding how "engaging



Table 2 Features of engaging and disengaging managerial behaviours

Characteristics of Engaging Managers	Characteristics of Disengaging Managers
Communicates/makes clear what is expected	Fails to listen and communicate
Listens, values and involves team	Lacks empathy or interest in people
Supportive	Blames others/does not take responsibility
Shows active interest in others	Self-centred
Clear strategic vision	Doesn't motivate or inspire
Shows empathy	Unapproachable
Good leadership skills	Lacks awareness
Respected	Aggressive
Target focused	Does not deliver



managers”—defined as people who inspire and engage their teams to perform well—behave in their dealings with people. The study asked engaging managers, their managers and their teams to articulate what they regarded as engaging behaviour and to give their views about disengaging behaviours to be avoided. The features of engaging and disengaging managerial behaviours which were identified included in Table 2.

The study found the manager’s role in creating and maintaining engagement to be vital, particularly around his or her approachability, awareness of what was happening in the organisation and the team, and high levels of skill in two-way communication. Of significance is the fact that the study concluded that engaging managers were made, not born. They had become effective managers over time through observations (by taking the “good bits” of other managers they had observed and avoiding the “bad bits” of behaviour) and through self-reflection.

Putting Principle 4 into practice requires an organisation to focus on developing and improving the

effectiveness of its managers in order to increase the performance of their teams. Part of a manager’s development should therefore focus on identifying opportunities to improve his/her management skills and behaviours.

Conclusion

In order to maximise employee levels of performance, organisations should be investing time and resources in people development, most notably on improving the effectiveness of managers in the areas of people management and engagement. As an HR professional, you have a key role to play in facilitating any such investment, and are in a unique position to add strategic value by providing managers with the appropriate guidance, training, and support in these areas. The four Principles referred to above are offered as a starting point in planning the level and type of investment required for your organisation. **HR**

- ¹ *One More Time, How Do You Motivate Employees?* F. I. Herzberg 1968, Harvard Business Review, vol 46, Issue 1 pp.53-62. His theory, known as the Motivation-Hygiene theory or the “Two factor theory” remains one of the most widely accepted and replicated studies on job attitudes.
- ² See the UK Corporate Leadership Council research on *Employee Engagement: Management for High Performance and Retention* (2005)
- ³ The Engaging Manager Robinson D and Hayday S (Institute for Employment Studies Report 470, November 2009)

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