



Richard Wallace  
Managing Director

## 10 Myths about Motivating People ...and the Real Truth

Spend enough time in meetings or the executive lunchroom, and you're destined to hear your fair share of managers' complaints about their employees.

But as these leaders vent their frustrations, they're actually looking in the wrong direction.

Here's the real truth: If employees aren't motivated, then we should look to their managers and organizational practices. Those who dismiss their teams' grievances can sabotage staff performance and bottom-line results.

If you want your employees to perform to their best abilities, take some advice from organizational behavior expert Stephen P. Robbins, PhD, author of *The Truth about Managing People* (FT Press, 2007). Contrary to much of the misleading, generalized and inconsistent information found in business books, Robbins has researched human behavior and provides practical advice on what works—and what doesn't—when managing a team.

As Robbins points out, traditional workplace incentives and disincentives function as cues for employee decision-making:

- ▶ "Do \_\_\_\_\_, and you'll get a bonus."
- ▶ "Don't do \_\_\_\_\_, or you'll get fired."

This approach discourages employees from examining the reasons why a task may or may not make sense. It forces them to make quick, intuitive decisions based on behaviors the system has historically rewarded and punished. But there are sometimes uninvited consequences.

Let's examine 10 common myths about motivation.

### Myth #1: People simply lack the motivation to work.

If you believe this myth, think about three things that may be going on in your employees' minds. Ask yourself:

- ▶ 1. Do your employees believe their maximum efforts will be recognized in performance appraisals?

For many employees, the response is a resounding "no." Their skill level may be deficient, which means that no matter how hard they try, they're unlikely to



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- ▶ richard@osmconsulting.com
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be high performers. Or, if the appraisal system assesses factors like loyalty or initiative, more effort won't result in a better review. If employees think their best efforts will yield only a mediocre review, they will suffer from low motivation.

- ▶ 2. Do employees believe a good performance appraisal will lead to organizational rewards?

When pay is allocated on seniority or special relationships, employees perceive the performance-reward relationship to be weak and demotivating.

- ▶ 3. Are the rewards that employees receive the ones they want?

Some people want promotions, others desire pay, and still others seek more interesting assignments. When rewards aren't tailored to employees' specific wants and motivating drives, then incentives are suboptimized.

To motivate employees, do what's necessary to strengthen performance-reward relationships. Make it obvious that specific behaviors will be rewarded, and always keep your word to maintain credibility and morale.

**The Real Truth:** If employees aren't motivated, the fault lies with their managers and organizational practices—not the workers. If the performance-reward relationship is weak, motivation drops.

## Myth #2: Happy workers are productive workers.

Everyone assumes satisfied workers are naturally more productive. This theory plays out as flexible work hours, onsite childcare and workout facilities, retirement plans and attractive workplaces. While these amenities are nice perks, they really aren't incentives for high performance.

While there is a correlation between job satisfaction and productivity, it's actually quite minimal: between +0.14 and +0.30. Thus, no more than 9 percent—or as low as 2 percent—of the variance in output can be attributed to employee satisfaction.

This is hardly enough to justify spending more money on making employees happier and more comfortable. Such benefits may contribute to employee retention, but not to productivity. Moreover, the evidence suggests that productive workers are more likely to be happy workers, rather than the reverse.

Productivity leads to job satisfaction. If you do a good job, you feel positive about your efforts. This, in turn, fuels your energy to accomplish more. Higher productivity should also be recognized with praise, increased pay and the opportunity to earn even greater rewards.

**The Real Truth:** Evidence suggests productive workers

are more likely to be happy workers, rather than the reverse.

Direct your efforts toward helping employees become more productive. Find ways to increase their training, improve job design, provide better tools and resources, and remove barriers that may impede them from doing a first-rate job.

## Myth #3: Tell employees to do their best, and let them find their own path.

A mountain of evidence shows us that people perform best when they're given goals:

- ▶ Specific goals increase performance.
- ▶ Difficult goals, when accepted, result in higher performance.
- ▶ Feedback leads to higher performance.

When you give an assignment with instructions to "do your best," you aren't providing enough specificity. Employees perform better when they know what needs to be done, the outcomes you seek, and how much effort they'll need to expend to achieve results.

**The Real Truth:** A large percentage of employees believe they lack specific goals at work. Clear, challenging goals, accompanied by feedback, set the stage for higher output.

## Myth #4: People want to set their own goals.

In spite of the logic behind participatory management, there's little evidence to show that goals set in partnership, between employee and manager, are superior to those unilaterally assigned by the boss.

Why wouldn't people do better with goals they help set?

The explanation may lie in the reality of workplace conditions. For participation to work:

- ▶ There must be adequate time to give input.
- ▶ Issues must be relevant to employees' interests.
- ▶ Employees must have adequate knowledge and skills to share their insights.
- ▶ The workplace culture must support employee involvement.

These conditions are sorely lacking in many workplaces, despite management's best intentions. In addition, some people don't want the responsibilities that come with participation. They prefer to be told what to do and let the boss do the worrying.

**The Real Truth:** Participation is no sure means for improv-

ing employee performance.

### Myth #5: Happiness leads to “flow” experiences.

When you are deeply involved in your work, nothing else seems to matter. You lose track of time—a state known as flow. Smart managers know that flow is a particularly fertile work condition.

Flow experiences are periods of deep concentration during which workers report feelings of gratitude and satisfaction. Can managers take steps to create this state? Absolutely.

To enter into flow, employees must be:

- ▶ Challenged
- ▶ Goal-directed
- ▶ Provided with feedback
- ▶ Allowed total concentration and creativity

Flow will materialize only when managers give their employees sufficiently challenging tasks and the necessary time to apply creativity without distractions and interruptions.

**The Real Truth:** Flow is most likely to be experienced at work and requires periods of intense concentration, without distractions. Managers can ensure that working conditions allow such concentration and minimal interruptions.

### Myth #6: Feedback needs to address personal qualities.

Telling employees that they’re doing a “good job” isn’t good enough. Neither are comments about attitudes or efforts. Feedback must be specific and about behaviors, not personal attributes.

No matter how upset you may be, limit feedback to job-related issues, and never criticize someone personally because of an inappropriate action. This is counterproductive, as it evokes strong emotional reactions that bury actual feedback.

**The Real Truth:** Feedback is effective when it is specific to behaviors and impersonal. Feedback should be descriptive, rather than judgmental or evaluative.

### Myth #7: Reward behaviors that indicate high performance.

Unfortunately, it’s easy—and often tempting—to measure the wrong indicators.

For example, the number of phone calls an employee places doesn’t measure customer relationships or sales. And when

managers reward individual accomplishments, yet consistently say they’re team-focused, employees take notice.

When you discuss the importance of quality work, pay special attention to employees who exceed their production goals, but churn out below-average work. Be sure to send the right message.

**The Real Truth:** Managers routinely measure behaviors they’re trying to discourage and fail to reward the ones they actually want. You get what you reward. If you want quality, reward it—and avoid rewarding quantity.

### Myth #8: Reward absolute results.

We know that employees make comparisons and look at relative rewards. They evaluate what they bring to their jobs, in terms of experience, effort, education and competence, with the rewards they receive: salary, pay raises and recognition.

Employees compare their situations to those of friends, colleagues, competitors or prior jobs. They assess how equitably they’re being treated.

Your team will likely be motivated when members feel they are equitably rewarded for their contributions. When they feel under-rewarded, they become angry, and this perceived inequity can lead to absences, reduced productivity, fudging on expenses and/or requests for a raise.

**The Real Truth:** People compare their rewards to those that others receive. As a manager, you cannot overlook this fact, and you need to be sensitive to the perceptions of relative rewards.

### Myth #9: Low-skilled workers receive pay and benefits commensurate with their value.

How do you motivate individuals who earn very low wages and lack opportunities to significantly increase their pay or receive promotions?

Traditional approaches have focused on providing more flexible work schedules and filling these jobs with teenagers or retired people. But something isn’t working: Turnover rates at fast-food restaurant chains still hover at around 300 percent annually.

Some chains have experimented with stock options and incentive pay; broader responsibilities for inventory, scheduling and hiring; and retirement plans, health insurance and scholarship money. But over a four-year period, turnover rates have been only minimally reduced: approximately 160 percent to 223 percent.

**The Real Truth:** Unless pay and benefits are significantly increased, high turnover will likely continue in these jobs.

**Myth #10: You can systematically apply motivation strategies to produce high performance.**

Job success depends on having adequate support resources. No matter how motivated employees may be, they won't perform well if they lack equipment, work space, supplies, skills or others' cooperation. They will quickly lose motivation, no matter the incentives or rewards offered.

As you determine why a particular worker is performing poorly, examine the work environment to see if it's supportive. Employee performance is a combination and interaction of:

- ▶ Ability
- ▶ Motivation
- ▶ Opportunity

**The Real Truth:** Regardless of motivation, employee performance will suffer if the work environment is unsupportive. The most willing and able employee may face obstacles that constrain performance.



- » P.O. Box 382494
- » Birmingham, AL 35238
- » [www.osmconsulting.com](http://www.osmconsulting.com)

