

Major motivators: Achievement, learning, inspiration and, yes, money

Written by Julie Desmond

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After releasing their Career Motivation Test and collecting data from over 6,000 test-takers from every walk of life, Psychtests AIM Inc. uncovered just how unique people are when it comes to naming what motivates them at work. Their analysis determined that the top three work motivators were Achievement, Learning, and Inspiration. So employers, you no longer need to pay decent wages to your employees, right? Wrong. Money still talks, even when other incentives are in place.

Psychtests defines the Achievement motivator as, “a sense of satisfaction at reaching goals or rising up to meet challenges at work.” My friend in accounting has an opportunity to travel to India for the month of October. “We want you to run the project,” he was told. I thought that sounded like an honor. He scoffed and said, “They’re not giving me any extra money.” He will travel around the world, away from family, friends and familiar food, succeed on the project and in exchange? He will be satisfied when he completes the project, but without a financial piece, he feels slighted.

Learning is described as a desire to gain new knowledge and insight, as well as learn new skills. A tuition reimbursement program will keep good employees in place for four years or longer. I have seen many employees linger in unsatisfying positions while they finish a training program or wrap up a degree. When the learning is complete, they move on. As a recruiter, I know which employees are ready to dip as soon as class is paid for. As an employer, do you know, too? The companies who benefit most from using learning as a motivator are those that offer a completion bonus following the training. Yes, you’ve already paid for the degree. But your improved employee will leave when they’re done, unless you motivate with money in addition to paying for classes.

Inspiration, “a desire to inspire others, either through creative means or by opening minds to new ideas,” is a flimsy motivator. Everyone wants to be impactful and inspire others, but there is a parallel universe, called Community Service, in which they willingly do it for free. Rock climber-turned-educator Greg Mortenson (Three Cups of Tea fame) builds schools for girls in Afghanistan. Few stories are more inspirational than his, but he still spends considerable time every year fundraising. Building schools requires currency. Few people are fortunate enough to live indefinitely on their influence alone.

When it comes down to deal-breakers on the job, all the achievement, learning and inspirational opportunities in the world won’t pay the rent. Surveys like these show that motivators are complicated, but all else being equal, it’s still best to show your best employees the money.

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