

Motivating Agents: Why it doesn't work

A topic that I'm often asked about is how to motivate agents. Executives are always looking for ways to improve the attitude and performance of their agents. Clients will tell me about how they've met and worked with each of their agents to get them to improve their performance but can't seem to make a difference.

The answer is that you can't motivate agents. It's not that your agents are a peculiar breed or that they're an apathetic bunch. The fact is that you can't motivate anyone! Motivation only comes from within. Agents are only self-motivated. Think of it this way: If you get someone to do something they don't want to do, it's coercion. Agents will only do what they choose to do. Don't take my word for it. Use your own experience with agents as your best example. Agents will generally perform only to a level that matters *to them*. No amount of threatening, pleading or rewarding will motivate them into action.

Is that, then, the end of the story? Is there no hope for moving agents beyond their current state? Not at all. There is a way to make a difference. And it's not a theory. I've seen it work on a regular basis. The key to getting agents to rise above their present level of performance is to 1) develop a district/agency culture, 2) recruit to a purpose, and then 3) appeal to that purpose to bring out the best in your agents' performance and drive.

1) Developing a Culture

Most properties have policies and procedures, employee manuals and guidelines, effective marketing messages, and beautiful statements of mission/vision/etc. mounted on the wall. All of those are well and good, but they don't address the matter which has the greatest impact on their business and their teams. They don't address the Purpose of the organization and as such, have no yardstick against which to measure decisions, policies and strategies.

In the absence of a clear Purpose - the "WHY" of the organization - agents are simply hired to fill vacancies, policies are developed which are unclear and don't further the attainment of a purpose, systems are lacking, actions are taken which would otherwise be in direct conflict with the Purpose of the organization, and decisions are made inconsistently, without regard to the culture of the organization.

In contrast, a property which has a clear Purpose ("Why"), a Mission ("What"), and a set of Values ("How"), hires smarter, has a consistent set of policies that support its Purpose, has a yardstick to measure its decisions against, has an easier time attracting and retaining the right agents, and has the means to develop and deliver a clear marketing message.

Let's define and discuss the implications of having Purpose, Mission and Values in your organization.

Purpose is the "WHY" of the equation. It defines why we do what we do. Each decision and policy should take the district/agency closer to achieving its "WHY".

Mission is the "WHAT" of the equation. It defines what the district/agency will be doing to achieve its Purpose. Staying true to the broad "WHAT" will allow the district/agency to focus on its core activities and strengths.

Values are the "HOW" of the equation. Values define how the Mission will be carried out in an effort to achieve the Purpose.

Purpose:

Purpose defines why we do what we do. It defines why we go to work each day. Without purpose, agents just go through the motions and as most of us know, there's a great difference between activity and achievement. Having a clear purpose creates a yardstick, so to speak, to measure our decisions against. It helps us become passionate, helps us to select among the many options presented to us, helps us make better hiring decisions, and keeps us on track. It's possible to succeed without a clear purpose, but having one speeds and magnifies the results.

When a district/agency has a clearly defined purpose it begins to act as a magnet, attracting the kind of agents who will further the purpose; agents who are like-minded. Not only will having a purpose attract the right agents, but it will also act to retain them. This is the power behind the success of many not-for-profit organizations. Although they often are unable to pay their agents great sums of money, they continue to attract and retain agents who are dedicated and who work hard to achieve the purpose of the organization. While your organization's purpose may not be as altruistic as a not-for-profit's purpose, it definitely plays an important, almost critical, role.

Create a clear, worthwhile purpose for your organization. How you develop a meaningful purpose? Involve agents throughout the organization to develop and distill the essence of why your organization exists. Don't simply rely on the executive team to develop and then dictate the purpose to the group. And certainly don't rely on an outside district/agency to create your purpose for you! It has been my experience that a well-defined statement of purpose is a single sentence, crafted to capture the essence of "why" the organization exists using as few words as possible and resonating when read or spoken. This brings clarity and energy to it, and makes it much easier to keep in mind when making decisions and policies. A clear Purpose is the driving force behind all successful organizations.

Mission:

Mission defines what the district/agency does to achieve its Purpose. The better defined a district/agency's mission is, the easier it is to choose among the many opportunities that will present themselves. A mission - the means to achieve the Purpose - can be fairly narrow or be somewhat broad. However, one that is too narrow can unduly restrict an organization from considering opportunities that would otherwise be an excellent fit, and one that is too broad offers no guidance at all and may cause an organization to spread itself too thin, do a poor job at everything, and essentially dilute its effectiveness.

Values:

Values define how the Mission will be carried out in an effort to achieve the Purpose. They define the "rules of the game". Some of them will come to mind quite easily - things like honesty, courtesy, kindness, and ethics. But some other important values will only surface when brainstorming takes place - when different perspectives and voices are heard. Values like authenticity and vulnerability may be placed on the table for consideration. (Which, by the way, are two essential qualities of an exceptional leader.) It doesn't matter which values are decided upon as being important to the district/agency. What *is* important, however, is that whatever they are, everyone in the district/agency lives by them and supports them. It's important that the policies and decisions of the district/agency are in alignment with them. If the district/agency has an acknowledged list of values it purports to live by and then chooses to ignore them, the list becomes a sore point and acts as a negative reflection of what kind of organization you really lead.

2) Recruit to a Purpose

When we try to motivate someone it either doesn't work or at best simply gets them to go through the motions. The key therefore, is getting the right agents on board in the first place; agents who are self-motivated. What's the best way to achieve this goal? Recruit to a Purpose. By recruiting to your purpose, you attract candidates that believe in what you believe in. They join you not only to make a great living, but to accomplish something more - something meaningful. They decide to make a living by helping agents in some way. Conversely, agents that comes on board without some driving purpose will work to just to get the job done and no more. They tend to lack the self-motivation you want. Work on developing a way to screen candidates to best determine whether they are aligned to your property's/district/agency's culture. Once you're clear on your overriding Purpose, this process becomes fairly apparent.

3) Appeal to the Purpose

Once you have a clear Purpose developed (along with the associated Mission and set of Values), over-communicate it! Starting with your new-employee orientation, drive the message home. Make sure you live and breathe your

Purpose. Don't make the message trite by putting up posters around the office and the property; instead speak it (sincerely) at every opportunity. Make certain your performance reviews take into account how well the person lived up to the Purpose. Ask yourself whether each business decision, system and policy will take you closer to or further from your Purpose.

When a property/district/agency has clearly defined its Purpose, Mission, and Values, then all decisions, policies, and actions will have a means to keep them on course and you will have an organization which attracts and keeps the best!

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