Motivating Research Coordinators with a Career Path and Development Program

By Jo Ann Broeckel Elrod

Motivating employees is one of the most important functions of a supervisor because it affects not only the employee's job satisfaction, but also his or her performance in accomplishing the supervisor's and organization's objectives. Good supervisors understand that motivated employees are happier and are more likely to be high performers, while unmotivated employees are more likely to be less productive, make mistakes, or get bored and leave their position. This article discusses a system to motivate employees, with an example for a clinical research coordinator.

Motivation is an aspect of individual will. While we can't force someone to be motivated, we can encourage and promote their self-motivation. Some factors that motivate employees include opportunities to assume greater responsibilities, learn new skills, obtain certification and advanced training, earn higher pay, and gain promotions.

As a supervisor, you should not make assumptions about what motivates your employees. In particular, do not assume that all employees share the same motivations or that they have the same motivations as you. The first step is thus to find out what motivates each employee. They may not have thought about their motivations explicitly, so start by asking them about their short-term and long-term goals.

Encourage your employees to set their own goals, with your guidance. The process will help them think about their strengths and weaknesses, and what goals are realistic. They will be more motivated to meet goals that they set for themselves. In providing guidance, discuss both the employee's and the organization's needs. If you are not honest about the organization's needs, the goals may conflict or the employee may feel manipulated.

Next, ask your employees what makes them happy or not happy. This question will flush out motivators and demotivators, such as being micromanaged or not managed enough. The discussion that follows may resolve the issues or generate objectives, such as "develop weekly reporting system."

In this article, objectives are steps in the path to achieving goals. For example, the goal, "become a research manager," may be achieved, in part, by accomplishing the objective, "hire, train and supervise two student interns this summer."

The system described in this article is designed for employees with career goals. What about employees who are satisfied with their current situation and don't want anything to change? In this case, the supervisor must decide if he or she is also satisfied with the current situation. If not, what changes does he or she want to see? The challenge then becomes how to explain to the employee what changes are desirable and why the employee should care. The solution may be to define very modest goals for the employee.

Career Path and Development Program

The University of Washington (UW) uses a Career Path and Development (CPD) program to identify career goals and personal developmental priorities, align work performed with organizational goals, attain high standards of performance, recognize achievements, and improve deficient areas. UW uses the CPD program instead of a conventional performance

appraisal system. Employees appreciate the program for these reasons and because it enlists their supervisor in achieving the employee's personal goals.

Under the program, the employee completes or updates a CPD form and gives it to his or her supervisor. The supervisor reviews what the employee wrote and adds his or her own perspectives. The employee and supervisor then meet to discuss the employee's goals and the supervisor's thoughts on the employee's performance in achieving the previous goals. This process occurs every six months, or when the employee's situation changes significantly, e.g., with a new supervisor or major new responsibilities.

The CPD program is only part of the motivation solution. Other parts include treating employees with respect, rewarding employees appropriately, and other aspects of good employee management.

This article is based on the UW CPR program, but with some important changes. A CPD form is available at http://www.firstclinical.com/journal/2009/0910_CPD_Form.doc.

Step 1

The employee first completes or updates the CPD form. Start with questions about long term goals:

- What are your career goals? Why are these your career goals? Have they changed over time? If so, how?
- What skills and personal attributes do you possess that will help you achieve your career goals?
- What additional skills and personal attributes do you need to achieve your career goals?
- How can your supervisor help you achieve your career goals?

Ask the employee how his or her skills and personal attributes relate to his or her goals:

- Quality of work. Are your quality standards adequate? Does your work meet or exceed the quality standards of the organization?
- Planning and organizing. Do you arrange your work so it can be performed efficiently? Do you plan assignments to meet deadlines without a last-minute rush? Do you adequately track the progress of your work? Do you use your time effectively?
- Technical competence. Do you have the necessary expertise and experience? Do you stay current with new developments in your field?
- Problem solving. Do you analyze problems insightfully and make sound decisions? Do your solutions demonstrate practicality and creativity?
- Personal accountability. Do you take ownership of your work?

Asking these questions in the context of goals helps employees understand how they can leverage their strengths and why they should address any weaknesses. For example, if their goal is to be promoted to a managerial position, they need to demonstrate strong planning and organizing skills. Note that having a skill or personal attribute may not be enough to achieve an employee's goals; the purpose of an objective may be to demonstrate the skill or personal attribute to management.

Ask about objectives for the next six months that can further these goals:

- In the next six months, what can you do to help the organization and further your goals?
- Why are these your objectives?
- What are your strengths and weaknesses in relation to these objectives?

- What skills and personal attributes will you develop in the process?
- How can your supervisor help you achieve these objectives?

The employee classifies each objective as primarily supporting job performance or career development. Job performance objectives primarily pertain only to the employee's current position, i.e., doing his or her job or improving the ability to do the job. Career development objectives primarily support longer-term goals, e.g., promotion to research manager.

Objectives should have significant impact and not be trivial or routine to the job. There should be one to three, and certainly not more than seven.

Most employees will be more motivated to accomplish their objectives once they understand how doing so will help them achieve their personal career goals. The process is iterative. After answering all the questions, the employee should make sure all the answers are consistent. The process is also iterative from period to period. Additional questions therefore include:

- Did I accomplish my objectives from the previous review period? What did or did not go well? What were the contributing factors? What could I have done differently that might have improved the result?
- Do I want to carry forward any objectives to the next period?
- Did I accomplish anything over the past six months that was not listed on the previous form?

Goals and objectives are best stated in the SMART format. Each goal and objective should be:

- Specific: Provide enough detail to clearly describe the goal or objective.
- Measurable: Provide concrete criteria for measuring progress.
- Achievable: Set goals and objectives that are realistic, yet challenging, taking into consideration time, resources and skills available.
- Results-oriented: Clearly describe the intended results that will occur when the goal or objective is achieved.
- Time-bound: Set a time limit for planning purposes.

Step 2

The supervisor reviews the employee's CPD form, asking himself or herself the following questions:

- Are the employee's career goals realistic? Have the employee's goals changed over time?
- Given these goals, has the employee identified the most important skills and attributes to develop?
- Given these goals and the organization's objectives, has the employee identified the best objectives to accomplish in the next six months? Are these objectives realistic?
- Did the employee accomplish his or her last set of objectives? Did he or she accomplish anything else? How did the employee's accomplishments contribute to the organization? How does this performance reflect on the new set of objectives?

Step 3

The employee and supervisor meet to discuss their respective perspectives, fine-tune the CPD form's contents, and develop a plan of action.

The plan for each objective answers these questions:
- What are the desired results? Why are they important? How will they be measured? What tangible, observable evidence will show that they have been achieved?
- What are the steps in the plan, in detail, with dates?
- What resources and actions are needed from others?

These plans are incorporated into the CPD form. Once the employee and supervisor agree, they sign the form. The supervisor keeps the original copy in the employee's file and makes a copy for the employee. They use the information to manage the employee's work for the next six months.

Study Coordinator Example

I supervised a study coordinator who wanted to become a research manager. Working together, we crafted a specific, measurable, achievable, results-oriented, and time-bound goal:

> In order to achieve my long term goal of becoming a research manager, I will gain supervisory experience by hiring, training and supervising 1–2 student interns (e.g., college students). In October, with consultation from my supervisor and the human resources department, I will create the job ad and training program for the intern positions. In November, I will post the ad at the campus employment center and then interview and hire the interns. The interns will start training in January. From January 15 through May 15, they will produce satisfactory work in data entry and other assigned tasks, as measured by normal departmental standards. Per internship policy, I will secure faculty mentors for them prior to January. I will also arrange for them to talk with three employees about the nature of clinical research work. In May, I will debrief the intern(s) and submit a report to my supervisor.

As an exercise, this goal can be converted to fit into the CPD form.

Conclusion

The CPD system makes the employee and supervisor members of the same team, with shared goals and objectives. While the focus is on the employee, the supervisor has significant responsibilities, which may include the goal of becoming a better supervisor.

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