

How to get your employees to work 24/7!

By Dr Ian Hopkins, Associate Director, and Erick Fibich, Director, Potomac Asia Pacific

- How do organisations generate a level of motivation among their employees and so capture the benefits from light bulb insights?
- When staff are engaged their sub-conscious mind as well as their conscious mind think about work inside and outside work hours.
- For meetings to capture light bulb insights they need to be structured accordingly.

No, we are not talking sweatshops and about slave labour. Quite the opposite — we are talking about your most motivated and happiest employees and a particular characteristic of those employees — light bulb moments.

Light bulb moments

I undertook a survey of friends and acquaintances to determine the circumstances in which they most frequently got their inspiration or break-through idea. Here is a summary of results.

Sam, a financial planner, said 'My light bulb moments come generally at 3–4am in the morning when I am thinking about issues. It can also come when I am in the shower. It is thought after thinking issues through and there is a staged understanding. I go to conferences and the ideas come in the plane going home. The super rules are changing and they are very complex. Over the weekend on Friday and Saturday night the light bulb went on about how to explain to my clients.'

Bill also clarified the difference when real passion and involvement are in play: 'For work, I rarely cared unless I was engaged and felt like I was either winning or I got some praise. Other than that I probably went years without a creative moment on work except when solving a problem related to my home renovation that I cared about.' I

only get these moments in the shower when I am determined and motivated. Now I do it for my business because the cause is the passion.

Alex thinks creatively when he is relaxed: 'I swim daily and use this time to think through the activities that I am currently engaged with or consider issues that will require some strategic planning in the future'.

Nicholas is a sculptor who designs and assembles complex installations often based on mathematical formulae. Nicholas had a problem that the structural member would not fit without interfering with his design. The answer to his problem came to him while rowing in the gym.

Malcolm, a consultant and astrophysicist currently writing books on mathematics, says he captures ideas which come to him in the middle of the night by keeping a diary beside his bed.

Robert is a book publisher who also gets his inspiration while under a shower. (He reckons that the hot water stimulates the brain!). He points out that when most good writers write a first draft of an important document, they then wait for two days or longer before reviewing it.

These examples are based on a sample drawn from personal communication with personal contacts. But their experience is common to a big proportion of people — including your work colleagues.

We tend to think of 'light bulb' ideas as those relating to a major scientific breakthrough but more commonly it

relates to a variety of other things like a new clarity of understanding enabling clearer articulation of an idea for an email, presentation, or whatever. Or it could be a new insight about how to structure a deal. It could be about almost any issue or problem.

What have the above examples got to do with motivation in an organisation?

A lot. Because these people were so motivated that their brains continued to solve problems even when not in the work place. Motivated employees don't just work eight hours a day, because, for the other 16 hours a day, their sub-conscious (as well as the conscious) is driving the process.

What do we learn from these responses?

- Virtually all important insights come when not actually in the workplace.
- Good ideas only come to those who are highly motivated and engaged.
- Good ideas only come after grappling with the subject, when the issue is clearly defined and all aspects of the issue or problem are internalised.

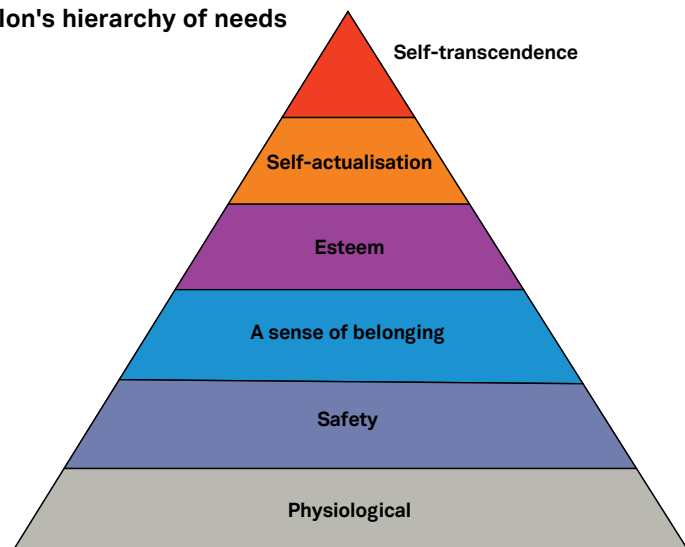
So insights do not come without time and emotional energy spent first on working on the task in hand. The unmotivated do not spend this time or emotional energy — their thoughts are focused on issues outside their work. Unmotivated employees do not grapple with the problem, as Bill's testimony indicated.

The importance of motivation is underlined by empirical results from a study by Harter and Schmidt of employee satisfaction and engagement in 7,939 business units in 36 companies. They concluded that 'employee satisfaction and engagement are related to meaningful business outcomes at a magnitude that is important to many organisations and that these correlations generalise across companies'.

What creates and drives motivation?

How do organisations generate this level of motivation among their employees and so capture the benefits

Figure 1: Maslow's hierarchy of needs



from light bulb insights? In other words, how do managers have their staff so engaged that their sub-conscious mind as well as their conscious are thinking about work at all times of day and night?

A complex multiplicity of factors drive motivation. Fortunately, Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper 'A Theory of Human Motivation' provides a useful structure for this discussion by defining a 'hierarchy of needs' to be met for high levels of motivation:

For an employees to be at the higher levels of 'self-actualisation' or 'Self-transcendence', all their needs below that level must be met. Here we will assume that physiological needs for survival and the safety needs (absence of war, physical violence, etc) are both met.

A sense of belonging

The next level need is a sense of 'belonging'. Employees of a corporation have a basic need to feel they belong. There are many aspects to this — a positive relationship with peers is important while being asked to attend meetings and attending meetings ratify a sense of belonging. Perhaps this is partly why employees accept invitations even if they believe the meeting will be a waste of time. Meetings are also important to a sense of belonging because they are where relationships begun around the water cooler are developed and affirmed.

What does motivation have to do with meetings? Also a lot. An important part of motivation comes from the social belonging which is then followed by esteem and self-actualisation (to be the best one can be). Without a sense of belonging, we cannot be motivated.

Given that humans are a social species, meetings satisfy this basic need.

Esteem

All humans have a need to feel respected. Esteem presents the typical human desire to be accepted and valued by others. Meetings are important to esteem because they are where good work is acknowledged by the leader in the presence of peers. Esteem also includes the need for self-esteem and self-respect and this is based on the accomplishment of meaningful work whereby the employees know they have made a genuine contribution.

In other words productive meetings are an essential requirement for an employee's sense of belonging. Meeting productivity is both a driver and a symptom of this sense of belonging.

From the combined experience of individuals a broader group emerges so that culture is now defined by groups collectively determining motivation levels.

Self-actualisation

Maslow describes this level as the desire to accomplish everything that

one can, to become the most that one can be. Because meetings are where culture is nurtured, productive meetings are a vital ingredient for motivation and the productivity of meetings is a manifestation of mutual respect between leader and employee and between peers.

Self-transcendence (and culture)

The self only finds its actualisation in giving itself to some higher goal outside oneself. Thus, to be highly motivated, the employee must believe implicitly in the vision of the organisation and internalise its culture. Vision and culture are conveyed in many ways but again meetings are where these values are articulated verbally and in the form of action.

Bruno Bettelheim says, 'If we hope to live not just from moment to moment, but in true consciousness of our existence, then our greatest need and most difficult achievement is to find meaning in our lives'. Peters and Waterman found that, without exception, the dominance and adherence of culture proved to be an essential quality of the excellent companies studied. Poor performing companies may also have strong culture but a culture focused on internal politics rather than the customer, or on 'numbers' rather than the product and the people who make and sell it.

Motivation is not something that can be instructed by managers — motivation happens as a result of the alignment of a number of factors — a sense of belonging, meaningful work and the acknowledgement of peers and managers are just some of the key factors.

Motivated people are happy people. A study by Curtin University found that job satisfaction comes not from the size of the pay packet but from those we work with, the support we get, and the freedom and flexibility we have.

Another study found that a reduction in work hours was associated with an increase in productivity. How could that be so? Of course the answer lies above — people working fewer hours were happier and more motivated and the higher level of motivation translated into a brain working productively even when not at the work place.

What are the keys to motivation?

The first key is good leadership by an immediate superior who is willing to listen, clearly articulates purpose, and whose values align with the objectives of the organisation as a whole. A good manager will acknowledge the accomplishment of tasks and will ensure staff are not responsible for factors beyond their control, for example, when achieving defined objectives requires the employee to work unrealistically long hours. The difference between good and bad managers is that a bad manager tries to make his staff do what he wants them to do but a good manager makes his staff want to do what he wants them to do.

Good relationships with peers based on mutual respect is also an essential prerequisite for motivation. This creates a sense of belonging is a fundamental human need for any member of an organisation whether it be a bikie gang or a large company.

Meetings are where your organisation's strategy is ultimately translated into action items. Meetings are where relationships are formed and culture is nurtured. Meetings are where good leadership generates motivation. By saving time and generating productivity good meetings make an invaluable contribution to your bottom line.

Meetings are not only a productivity driver per se but they are also symptomatic of these relationships.

But most meetings are not productive. Seventy per cent of respondents in a Microsoft Office survey of over 38,000 people in 200 countries said they felt meetings weren't productive. This suggests that most people find meetings to be demotivating and that this is where significant opportunities for improvements in productivity lie.

Structure your meetings to capture light bulb insights

For a meeting to be motivating many things must be done right: clear agenda items, well documented minutes and action items, efficient handling of the meeting by the chair who also articulates the relevance of the meeting to the organisation's

strategy and vision, and who is inclusive by ensuring all attendees feel that their contributions are valued and their work recognised.

But if the chair of the meeting says 'Here is the problem and we're not leaving until we find a solution', then it is highly unlikely that a satisfactory solution will be found. A meeting whose agenda includes both the defining of a complex problem and its solution is almost bound to fail or, at best, come up with a sub-optimal solution.

For meetings to capture light bulb insights they need to be structured accordingly. The first time an issue or problem is raised in a meeting it is important to allow time for a full discussion of all aspects of that issue or problem. Then sufficient time should elapse before the next meeting to allow for all participants to cogitate on the issue or problem. This is when light bulb moments happen to motivated employees who have reached the level of self-actualisation and self-transcendence. The next meeting can then focus on a solution with the benefit of insights from participants' light bulb moments.

In summary, management guru, Peter Drucker is alleged to have said 'culture eats strategy for breakfast. All success boils down to the motivation and its culture — motivating employees is not a luxury, it's a necessity to survive and thrive'.

If you don't think your culture is motivating you may be letting a lot of people down. I challenge you to ask yourself 'what else is more important to maintain competitiveness?'. ■

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