

# Employee Motivation:

Be Open. Involve Others. Keep Score.



There are many ways to motivate employees, but setting targets and providing positive reinforcement seem to inspire people the most.

BY MARK L. JOHNSON

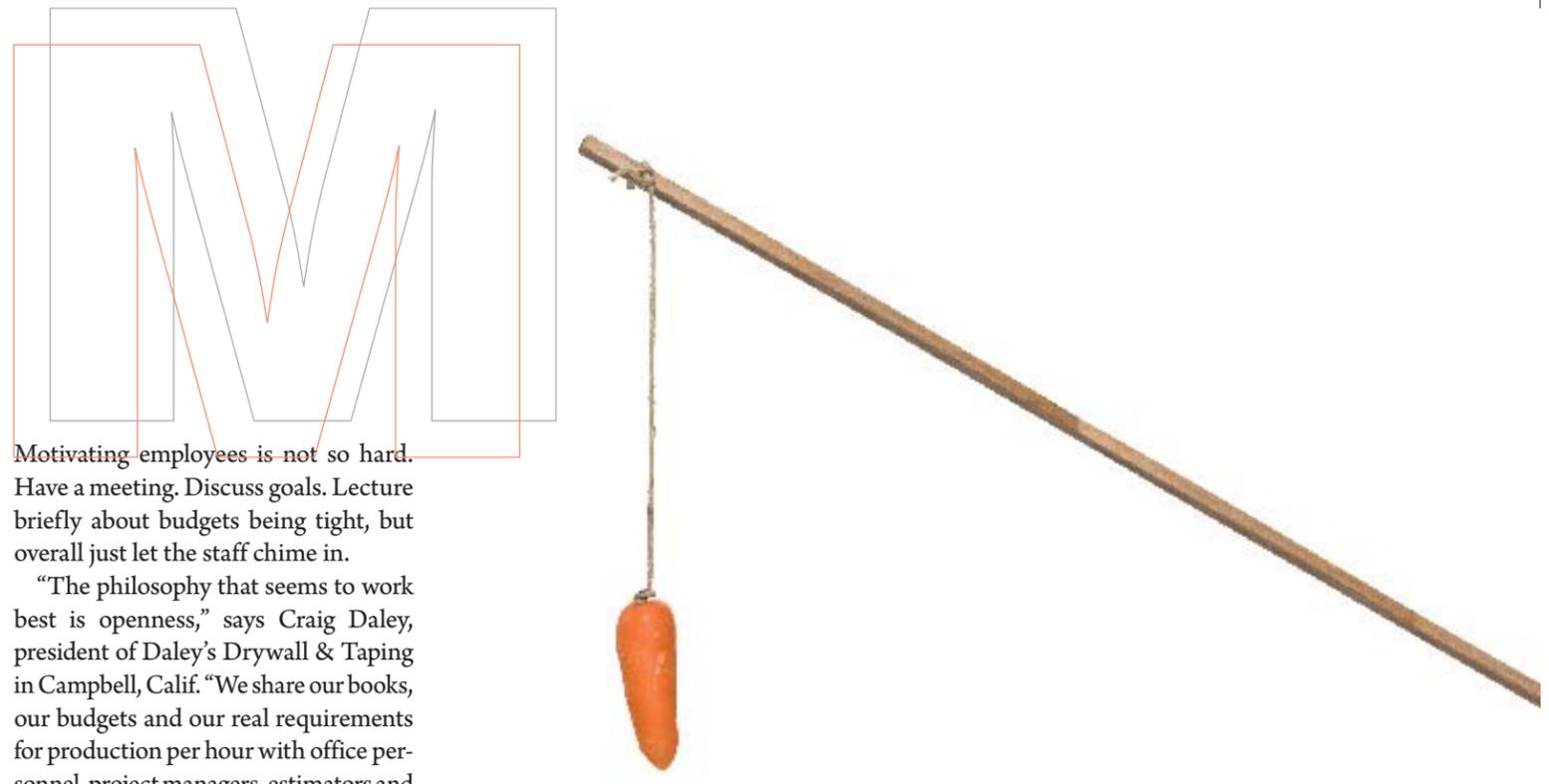
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Motivating employees is not so hard. Have a meeting. Discuss goals. Lecture briefly about budgets being tight, but overall just let the staff chime in.

"The philosophy that seems to work best is openness," says Craig Daley, president of Daley's Drywall & Taping in Campbell, Calif. "We share our books, our budgets and our real requirements for production per hour with office personnel, project managers, estimators and field foreman."

With that simple formula, Daley says employees work harder and want to continue to improve each day. Openness is the key to motivating employees.

**Candid Conversations**

In mid August, John Rapaport, director of operations at Component Assembly Systems, Inc. in Pelham, N.Y., met with a project team to discuss a job at the John F. Kennedy International Airport for Delta Airlines. Present were Rapaport, the project manager, the job foreman and several key men.

"We put out all the specs, the scope of work and the budget," Rapaport says. "We discussed the plans, the building details and even the weather that we'd come up against."

It has taken years to get to this point. In the past, kickoff meetings and project status meetings would easily devolve into finger-pointing and quarreling. Not anymore. Component Assembly Systems is having candid conversations about both the good and the bad in wall systems construction.

"Our industry has over the years,

unfortunately, not been great at bringing out issues in a timely manner so as to correct things before it gets too late," Rapaport says. "We aimed to fix that starting in the 1990s."

So, for nearly two decades, Component Assembly Systems has had management and field teams sitting together at confer-

**Our industry has over the years, unfortunately, not been great at bringing out issues in a timely manner so as to correct things before it gets too late.**

ence tables to discuss dollars, workflow and production quotas. "We've become a learning organization," Rapaport says. "We're no longer reacting to the market."

The first step in the CAS process is a mandated "kickoff meeting." Next, with the project under way, come "status meetings"—at least five of them during the project cycle with open and honest discussion encouraged. The process ends with a "close-out meeting" that involves the construction team and the executives.

"It's created this dynamic," Rapaport says. "The two key players, the project manager and the foreman, are pushing forward to make things better, and everyone around them is following. What's interesting is that they're working collaboratively."

To manage the process and provide good metrics, Component Assembly Systems put rigorous production track-

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ing in place. Eventually, the company bought a software business just so it could custom tailor its own tracking system.

"We've found that by keeping score, and informing the guys that we're keeping score, they tend to become competitive," says Michael Todaro, project manager, Component Assembly Systems. "This is a good thing."

Todaro typically runs three or four jobs and is responsible for 100 to 150 field personnel per job—300 or more individuals at any given time. Despite the complexities of having such a large personnel list and the challenges of working on New York-area high-rise structures, Todaro says the detailed information-sharing system motivates employees.

"Say we figured on framing 100 feet a day. Did we take into account that there's a bar joist here and that we're not going to be able to get that production quota?" Todaro asks. "Well, this will come up in

one of our status meetings. Maybe the head of estimating says, 'You know what? We missed that. In the future, let's cut that back to 80 feet a day. What do you guys think?' Then the field guys weigh in."

**We're not necessarily looking to them to make decisions, but involving them in company information and listening to their comments is empowering.**

The discussions foster teamwork. Field personnel, who are somewhat disposed to feeling isolated from management, relish being part of the process. They are, in fact, participating directly with management.

And CAS isn't the only company where

this works. "Motivating employees is about involvement at all levels regardless of whether it's a field guy or a receptionist," says Mark Billstrom, operations manager at Westin Construction in Bloomington, Minn. "We're not necessarily looking to them to make decisions, but involving them in company information and listening to their comments is empowering."

### A Motivating Culture

According to Rapaport, involving more people in the project management process is "the number one thing we've found over the last 15 years to improve value."

As soon as Component Assembly Systems wins a job, management works with the estimators, project managers and foremen to evaluate and set specific job targets. He admits that in the beginning, the meetings were awkward.

"We got into specific labor codes and the tracking of all the labor—adjusting

## Employee Motivation TRICKS OF THE TRADE



### Arrange after-hours activities.

"We're trying to do some things after work, such as boating [along the Mississippi River], to build up the camaraderie," says Mike Poellinger, president and general manager, Poellinger, Inc., La Crosse, Wis. "We used to do an annual golf outing and some evening parties, but we got away from them because of the economy. But now I'm thinking we can't afford to *not* do them."



### Share information.

"If we have two superintendents, and one in town X is having a problem with the inspector, maybe the other superintendent did a job there, knows the inspector and can share what needs to be done," says Mark Billstrom, operations manager, Westin Construction, Bloomington, Minn. "Just involving people gives them a better attitude."



### Increase the number of your bids.

"You have to bid as much as can to keep your people busy," says Mike Prindle, senior estimator at Poellinger, Inc. "I'm more motivated now than when business was easy."

budgets, percentages and our analysis on those codes and other detailed things that we put into our software,” Rapaport says. “So initially, when an estimator made an error, or there was a problem, people felt defensive.”

It took years to get over sensitivities and a decade to master working together collaboratively. “Now, 15 to 17 years into it, we see a whole turnaround,” Rapaport says. “Everyone looks forward to these exchanges. There’s a healthy, positive competition in the field—people feel good about the competitive environment. We push, but we do it in such a way that everybody understands the reasoning behind it. It’s not just based on emotion.”

“We’re not perfect. There are different levels of learning and new offices are going through the learning curve,” Rapaport adds. “But once they realize we’re not looking to blame anyone, we

have a dynamic way of doing work. Our people are happier.”

#### Praise Makes Perfect

John Bettencourt, project manager and foreman at Daley’s Drywall & Taping,

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is responsible for crews of 20 to 100, depending on the job. What does he do to motivate his employees?

“I always try to have good relationships,”

Bettencourt says. “I’ve seen foremen and worked with foremen who seem like they’re mad all the time. They’re always demanding something and yelling at the guys. I don’t think you get more production by doing that.”

Instead of yelling at crews for poor or unsafe work, Bettencourt cultivates a more grounded persona. He walks around and visits with crews regular. He likes to joke a little and take his lunch on the job site with his team.

“It’s better to just ask for something, and they’ll give it to you—if you have a good relationship with them,” Bettencourt says.

Todaro agrees.

“When somebody has an intimidating tone, people tense up. It’s human nature. You don’t even listen to *what* he’s saying, so much as to *how* he’s saying it,” Todaro says. “But when somebody says, ‘Hey, I really wanted to thank you for the job

you’ve done here the last couple months,’ and then takes you off to the side and says, ‘This was great. This was great. This was great. Here are a couple areas where we can fine tune things,’ they respond.”

It boils down to being interested in others.

“I try to learn a little about the key guys on the job,” Todaro says. “Maybe this guy has two kids that need to go to college. So, I say, ‘Hey, how’s Joe? Did he ever get accepted to Ohio State?’ They’ll say, ‘Oh, yeah, and my youngest just got accepted to Virginia Tech.’ It helps to connect.”

People are motivated when they like their supervisors, Todaro says. This works well when it comes time to provide direction, or even correction, on workflow and technique.

“Different people are motivated in different ways,” Todaro says. “You have to identify which motivational tool to

## Employee Motivation TRICKS OF THE TRADE



#### Offer incentives.

“We do something called the ‘Daley Dollar.’ If the crews achieve budgets and work safe, they get Daley Dollars, which they can use to buy products—tools and personal items,” says Craig Daley, president of Daley’s Drywall & Taping in Campbell, Calif. “In this tight market, we don’t have the luxury of doing high-compensation-type motivation plans, but a daily incentive works well for us.”



#### Play to your talent.

“You want to have your specialists doing their specialties,” says John Rapaport, director of operations, Component Assembly Systems, Inc., Pelham, N.Y. “Not every carpenter is a framer, a rocker or a taper. Keep the specialists in small crews and have task leaders watch certain tasks for the foreman. You want a kind of ‘tree of knowledge and experience’ on every project.”



#### Sometimes it’s the little things: Provide some TLC.

“One of the things the crews really appreciate is fresh water,” says John Bettencourt, project manager and foreman at Daley’s Drywall & Taping. “I usually keep bottled water for them on the job.”



#### Ask questions, listen.

“The best way to learn something is to talk to the guys,” says Michael Todaro, project manager at Component Assembly Systems, Inc. “I try to meet with the guy who runs the tapers and say, ‘What’s your biggest concern this month?’ He’ll say, ‘Well, they’re asking us to jump around, and there’s really no flow here.’ It helps them just to know that their concerns are being heard.”

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use for each individual. Some people are motivated by a check at the end of the job, others by a pat on the back. So, figure out what makes each guy tick and what you can do to help."

Bettencourt adds that he always looks for suggestions from field personnel. Recently, a crew member suggested that in building soffits crews could bypass snapping chalk lines and tie off a string as a simple build-to guide. It was a faster way to work, and Bettencourt welcomed the suggestion.

"I told him, 'Go ahead and do it that way. That's a good idea,'" Bettencourt says. "It made him feel great, and now the idea is working its way around the company."

#### Challenges Are Good

Mike Prindle, senior estimator at Poelinger, Inc. in La Crosse, Wis., works double-time these days. He does the

commercial estimating for drywall and metal studs, and business is tight. The goal of landing more work serves as his chief motivation.

"You have to take-off more plans to get the work these days. I may take-off

**I not only want to get my guys some work, but I want to be successful in what I do. I like golf outings. I like extracurricular stuff, but right now I look at it as my job to get work for our guys.**

20 plans and get only one or two jobs," says Prindle, who attributes his drive to how he was raised. "I not only want to get my guys some work, but I want

to be successful in what I do. I like golf outings. I like extracurricular stuff, but right now I look at it as my job to get work for our guys."

Bettencourt is job-driven, too.

"I get motivated by concentrating on work," Bettencourt says. "The most important thing that motivates me is organization. I log files and mark up drawings in order to make my job easier."

Yes, some individuals may be driven by nature and by upbringing. But all respond well to direction and encouragement. In the end, building a motivated team of employees is about helping individuals to find meaning in their work.

"You want to feel challenged. You want to feel directed," Rapaport says. "You want to feel that you're in a dynamic and not a reactive environment." ●

*Mark L. Johnson is an industry writer and marketing communications consultant.*

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