

How come no one ever washes a rental car?

Six ways to improve motivation and results

By Bill Granda

We all know the answer to the question in the title; we don't wash a rental car because we don't own it. Asking that same question in our business environment, what if everyone in our agency took ownership of their jobs and in the success of the agency? Imagine the results we could get?

In the early 1980s, a Texas oil refining company, Valero Energy Corp., was spun off as part of a legal settlement. The predecessor had serious safety, turnover and legal problems. Valero's new president decided not to repeat past mistakes. While other refiners were laying off employees, he sent a letter stating their jobs weren't in jeopardy and asking them for help in saving money. The results: Workers suggested \$43 million in operating savings, morale soared and turnover dropped to 3 percent, including retirement.

I'm using this story to illustrate the difference in performance and results when people get engaged in the business and in the processes of growth and improvement. We call it operationalizing your strategic plan—when everyone and every part of the business knows what is to be accomplished and is actively, eagerly and effectively participating.

The connection between motivation and results

So, how do we get to this state of nirvana? First, let's clear up some misconceptions about motivation and performance. Then we'll talk about some



powerful steps you can take in your agency to improve the sense of ownership and performance that bring great results.

Research over the past 50 to 60 years, plus my own experience as a manager and an improvement facilitator has shown time and again that people are motivated by work that is interesting, meaningful and challenging. Yet, judging by the attention paid to compensation, benefits and incentive packages, the message seems not to have fully caught on yet.

From his research on motivation and job satisfaction, published in *Harvard Business Review* in 1968 and again in 2003, Frederick Herzberg, management professor at the University of Utah, concluded that a different set of factors

led to job satisfaction (achievement, recognition, the work itself, responsibility, advancement, growth, etc.) than led to job dissatisfaction (company policy and administration; supervision; work conditions; salary; relationships with supervisors; peers and subordinates; etc.). He further found that improvements in the factors that can lead to job dissatisfaction didn't result in job satisfaction, increased motivation or improved performance. "Have spiraling wages motivated people? Yes, to seek the next wage increase." Creating job satisfaction requires a totally different set of factors that relate to our ability to achieve, and through achievement to experience psychological growth.

More recently, Marcus Buckingham and Curt Coffman in their book, *First, Break All The Rules*, reported similar conclusions from their research. They found 12 survey questions for which employee responses correlated highly with business results in four areas: productivity, profit, and retention and customer satisfaction. In other words, businesses with the most positive responses to the following 12 questions also had the best results and vice versa:

1. Do I know what is expected of me at work?
2. Do I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right?
3. At work, do I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day?
4. In the last seven days, have I received recognition or praise for good work?
5. Does my supervisor or someone at work seem to care about me as a person?
6. Is there someone at work who encourages my development?
7. At work, do my opinions seem to count?
8. Does the mission/purpose of my company make me feel like my work is important?
9. Are my co-workers committed to doing quality work?
10. Do I have a best friend at work?
11. In the last six months, have I talked with someone about my progress?
12. At work, have I had opportunities to learn and grow?

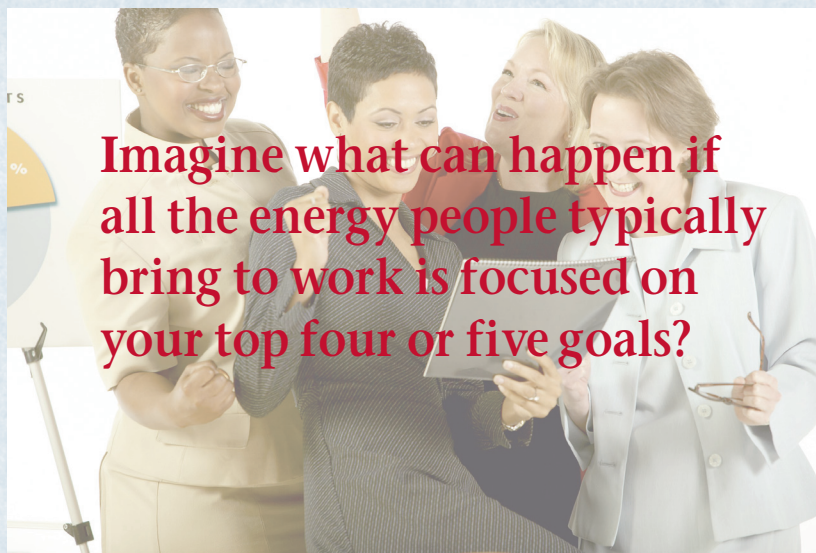
Again, pay, benefits and/or incentive programs didn't even make the cut for the questions because responses about them did not correlate well with business results, i.e. they did not create better performance and results. But, look at the 12 questions to see what did.

Six steps to increasing engagement

So, how do we get to the point where performance and results jump as people's

engagement in the business grows? Here are six steps I've seen proven over and over to be critical to creating this engagement.

1. Make sure everyone understands the vision and top goals of your agency and the contribution needed from them to hit those goals. First, don't assume that anyone knows your top goals unless you specifically talk about them daily. Several years ago we asked the six top managers of a client organization to write down and prioritize the top five goals of their company. We got 27 different



answers, with the president's top two no higher than four on anyone else's list. If that diversity of opinion exists among the top people, how can front-line employees know what they need to do to get the company closer to its goals?

I don't know people who get up in the morning and say, "I can't wait to get to work to see what I can screw up today." Imagine what can happen if all the energy people typically bring to work is focused on your top four or five goals? I've seen more cases where clients' results have taken off when they got people really involved and focused. A private educational organization had enrollments jump more than 20 percent in the eight months after its staff focused on their enrollment goals. A consulting firm that involved their entire sales team in their strategic planning hit their three-

year revenue goal, two years ahead of time.

After a seminar for a national association we recently conducted at one of the finest hotels in Las Vegas, I complimented hotel staff on how easy they made it for us in getting the room and AV equipment set up. Their response: "That's what makes us a five-star hotel." Wow! You know you're doing something right when the people re-arranging tables and chairs talk like that!

2. Get rid of inner circles. Most organizations have them, where the people inside the circle know what's going on and the people outside the circle wish they knew. Get rid of them. They foster the notion that some people are more important to the cause than others. A football player doesn't wonder if he's important to the team. A basketball player doesn't wonder if she's important to the team. Yet, we allow situations at work where people don't know if or how they are important to the business.

A client, the owner of a truck seat re-upholstery business, asked me to coach him on selling. Turned out his biggest obstacle to selling was that when he left the shop, no work got done. I suggested he show employees the costs of running the business and calmly mention that when he left, they weren't producing enough to cover their own wages. That simple act of inclusion resulted in a complete turnaround in their attitudes and productivity.

3. Pass problems down in your organization and solutions up. Usually it's the other way around, isn't it? When I was a Boy Scout leader, we had a mantra at camp. If a scout asked an adult for help, the adult replied, "Do I look like your Patrol Leader?" Immediately, the boy knew to go solve the problem among the other scouts. That was also an effective training tool to keep adults from

butting in when the boys should have been solving problems.

How often do we think we need to solve problems for our employees? Ben Zander, conductor of the Boston Philharmonic, tells of the time he realized that he was the only person in the orchestra that didn't make a sound. He didn't play the instruments, but he did create the circumstances in which music could happen extraordinarily well.

Instead of telling people how to do something, why not ask them, "What do you think?" "How do you think we should do it?" Those simple questions have a powerful affect. Isn't your job as manager to enable people to perform better today than they did yesterday and even better tomorrow? Doesn't solving their problems or giving them the answers rob employees of the chance to think and learn?

4. Give positive feedback. We can give positive, negative or no feedback to employees and co-workers. Which do you think is most common? No feedback followed by negative feedback. We tend to think: "People don't need positive feedback to do their job; that's what they get paid for." So we give none, but here's a reason to give it—a lack of feedback leads to extinction. If our goal is to eliminate improved behavior or performance, a really good way to do it is to say nothing.

Give positive feedback, even for small improvements. We don't need to wait till something is perfect. If it's better than it was, recognize it. Celebrate every success. Watch the positive reinforcement that occurs on a sports team—back pats, head butts, hugs—all kinds of verbal celebration. And, make sure to recognize both individual and team improvements.

5. Encourage, expect and help employees to learn constantly.

Opportunities abound for people in your agency to learn and grow. Continuing education requirements typically cover the technical end of the business. In addition to technical understanding, you can help people better understand the business end—how the agency makes money, how individual performances link to the agency's success. Encourage employees to develop their people skills, or their understanding of sales and marketing. We can take advantage



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of formal educational opportunities and opportunities inherent in everyday interactions with clients and other employees. Even encourage people to talk with each other regularly to plan out activities and debrief situations for ways to improve.

6. Own your own attitudes.

A thought I heard years ago has stuck with me: "The attitude of the leader is contagious and infects everyone around him or her." The research by Buckingham and Coffin cited above also discovered that an employee's immediate manager was the most important factor in determining an employee's engagement in their job and company and hence their performance. So the attitudes, positive or negative, of leaders at all levels have

a critical link to performance and business results.

Just so we're clear, by "positive" I mean attitudes that take us closer to our goals, and by "negative" I mean those that take us away from our goals. For example a client, president of his firm, included "innovation" as a core value of his firm, intending to encourage everyone to think and act innovatively. That is, until an employee pointed out that every time someone approached him with an idea, his first question was, "What will it cost?" Another example might be how we think about performance in our agency. If we focus on developing great performance, wouldn't you agree that would have a much different impact than if we focus on preventing bad performance?

So, starting with ourselves and continuing through other leaders in our agency, we can ask "which of my attitudes toward myself, my line of work, my agency, my clients, my employees, my co-workers are taking me closer to success and which are getting in my way?" If we want all of our employees to have attitudes appropriate to taking "ownership" in their jobs and the success of the agency, shouldn't we start by taking ownership of our attitudes?

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