

Employee Motivation During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A Municipal Analysis

Prepared by:
Jessica Sinkowski
Student # 108244

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Various motivational theories from Abraham Maslow, Chris Argyris and Fredrick Herzberg have explored the psychology of employee motivation. These theories have demonstrated that motivation is not something that can simply be supplied to employees; it is an internal state that creates external behaviours and is driven by various employee needs.

During times of social or economic pressures, like the COVID-19 pandemic, governments are depended on more than ever to provide essential services, while also facing intense financial scrutiny from the public, thus being tasked with doing more with less. Employees can individually be facing their own mental distress from the circumstances but are counted on to provide services efficiently and effectively. Employee motivation has a huge impact on productivity, thus it is important that municipalities ensure that employee motivation is addressed and improved so staff are able to provide the best service possible to the public.

This paper explores the theories surrounding employee motivation and worker needs, the role management has in addressing engagement, and why it is important, as well as the impacts the pandemic has had on worker needs and how it can be addressed.

SCOPE & METHODOLOGY

The psychology of motivation is a complex subject with many theories on what influences it. Prominent theories on motivation and employee needs that are regarded in the public and private sectors were researched and referenced through textbooks and scholarly articles. Management cannot supply motivation but has an important role in maintaining the workplace and jobs in a way that satisfy worker needs, and this role is examined, with an analysis from a municipal context. The impact of poor motivation in the workplace was researched, as well as the benefits of improved employee engagement. The specific impacts the COVID pandemic has had on employee motivation and worker needs is outlined through referencing statistical evidence from government and employment agencies. Options that could be considered by all municipalities to address employee motivation and engagement during and after the pandemic is presented, along with a case study on the City of Niagara Falls based on personal experience.

WHAT IS MOTIVATION?

Motivation is “the state or condition of being motivated or having a strong reason to act in a certain way” (Collins English Dictionary). Therefore, it is an internal state affected by an employees working environment which creates external behaviours, and as such, motivation cannot simply be instilled in staff by a manager or supervisor through a single conversation or act (Tindal, 2015). While management cannot supply motivation, they can control the working environment and should focus on ways it can be developed to positively impact employee motivation, improving engagement, productivity and achievement of organizational goals and objectives.

To ensure well motivated employees, it is important to first understand the nature of motivation and the theories that have developed in the area of workers needs. The worker needs that motivate performance have been demonstrated through four mainstream theories developed by Abraham Maslow, Chris Argyris, Frederick Herzberg, and Edward Deci/Richard Ryan that are well regarded in the public and private sectors and will be examined.

The Hierarchy of Needs Theory – Abraham Maslow (1943)

To understand motivational theories, it is best to start with the “Hierarchy of Needs” theory developed by Abraham Maslow, ideas not supported by research but influential nonetheless (Tindal, 2015). Originally a five-stage model, Maslow organized the various needs of humans into a hierarchical grouping, organized by basic needs (physiological, safety), psychological needs (belongingness and love, esteem), and self-fulfillment needs (self-actualization) (Maslow, 1954). See Figure 1.

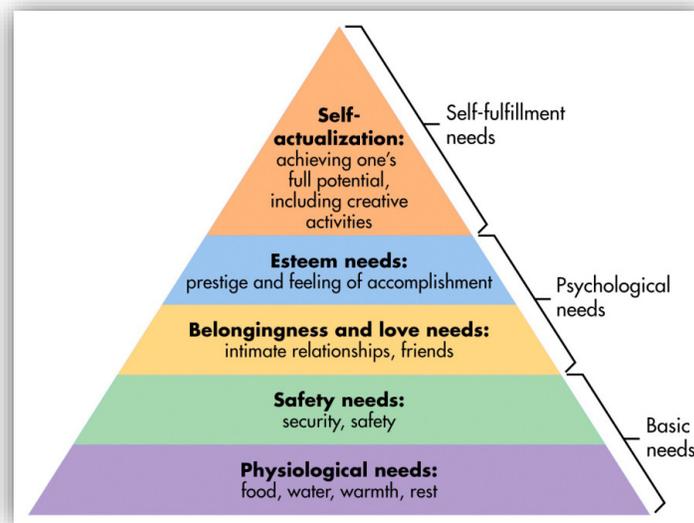


Figure 1: A graphic representation of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (McLeod, 2020)

Fulfilled needs do not necessarily motivate behavior; as lower level needs are met (physiological, safety and belongingness), employees motivators will move to higher level needs (esteem, and self-actualization) (Tindal, 2015). Therefore, good pay and job security alone will not impact behaviours; workers will develop higher level needs as their lower level needs have been met.

The Two Factor Theory of Motivation – Frederick Herzberg (1959)

Frederick Herzberg promoted job enrichment as a way to combat the restrictions on motivation in the hierarchical structure (Tindal, 2015). He grouped needs into two categories: **hygiene factors** (similar to the lower level needs in Maslow’s hierarchy – physiological, safety, belongingness) and **motivators** (similar to the higher level needs in Maslow’s hierarchy – esteem, self-actualization) (Tindal, 2015). Hygiene factors are those needs related to the setting of the job (such as working conditions and salary), that will create short-term results when addressed and require constant upkeep (Herzberg, 1987). On the other hand, motivators relate more to the content of the job (such as recognition or career advancement), which will create longer term benefits since the “ultimate reward is motivation” (Herzberg, 1987). As shown in Figure 2, while hygiene factors can reduce job dissatisfaction, only motivators can increase job satisfaction.

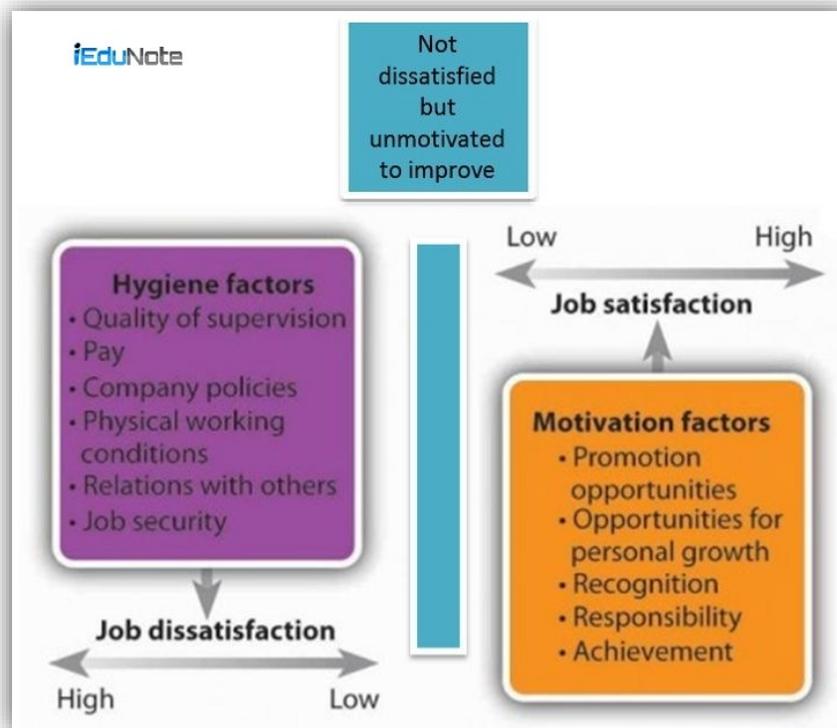


Figure 2: A graphic representation of Frederick Herzberg's Two Factor Theory of Motivation (iEduNote, 2021)

Herzberg emphasized that management should ensure a working environment that avoids dissatisfaction through well-developed policies, effective management, adequate pay and job security, with job satisfaction addressed through changes to the nature of the job (Tindal, 2015). He further stated that “job enrichment remains the key to designing work that motivates employees” (Herzberg, 1987).

The Individual and the Organization – Chris Argyris (1962)

Chris Argyris developed further ideas upon Maslow’s theory of worker needs with research from both government and business (Tindal, 2015). While he agreed that the two lower level needs are largely fulfilled, he argued that the higher level needs are not met due to the pyramidal organizational structure common to government institutions, which can create excessive specialization of function and requires employees to be dependent on and subordinate to management; as a result, workers have little control over their environment and are unable to pursue their higher level needs (Tindal, 2015). To combat this, Argyris encourages “enlightened management” where employees are seen for their creative value and encouraged to participate within the organization (Tindal, 2015).

Self-Determination Theory – Edward Deci & Richard Ryan (SDT) (1985)

SDT is a more recent theory developed by Edward Deci and Richard Ryan that posits all humans have a natural tendency to strive for growth through a need for competence (being satisfied with skills and behaviours), autonomy (being in control over our lives) and relatedness (being connected with others) (Schulte, 2020). These psychological needs generate intrinsic motivation that creates behaviours because they are “inherently satisfying or engaging” (Schulte, 2020). For example, an employee may be motivated to take professional development courses because of their intrinsic need for lifelong learning (competence). Alternatively, extrinsic motivation is influenced by potential rewards; however, that reward could itself be extrinsic (tangible, like a salary increase) or intrinsic (intangible, like receiving praise for a job well done) (Schulte, 2020). See Figure 3.

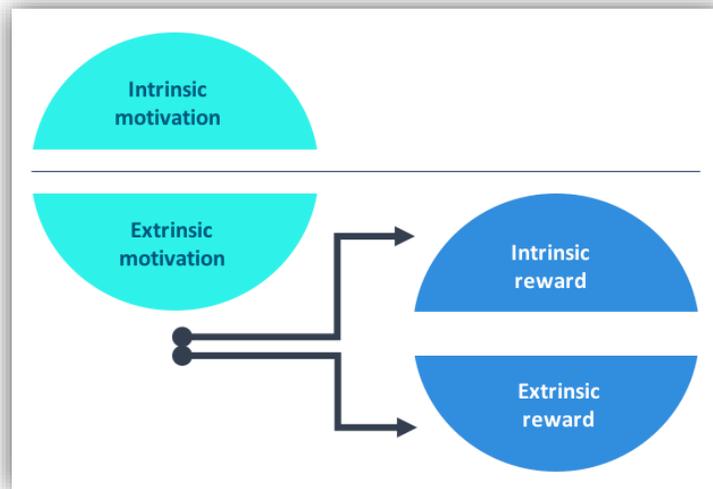


Figure 3: A graphic representation of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) (Schulte, 2020)

Managers need to understand the difference between the two types of motivation and how they are initiated. This theory states that intrinsic, or internal, motivation is what fuels our energy and commitment and inspires us to reach our full potential, NOT external structure (Brafford & Ryan, 2020). While intrinsic motivation is based on an individual's personal background and values, organizations can still promote working environments that address the three psychological needs that drive it and help individuals maintain their motivation (Brafford & Ryan, 2020).

Management and Motivation

As demonstrated through the various motivational theories, job performance is influenced by the fulfillment of needs; therefore, managers need to be aware of the varying needs of each of their employees, and understand those needs can change over time. Since motivation is an internal state, managers cannot supply motivation to their staff but must instead focus on ways they can change the working environment and the nature of the job that better satisfy worker needs. Employee's motivation will ebb and flow over time, and the needs that drive it will also change depending on their circumstances.

Ensuring well motivated employees is an ongoing process that requires management to know their staff and appreciate what their needs are at any given time. They should also appreciate their own responsibility for employee engagement and how they may better serve their staff. In a study on employee engagement in Canadian workplaces, survey respondents indicated the top three things that management could do to improve motivation and engagement included better communication of expectations, valuing employee opinions, and recognition for work well done (Baker, 2011).

Management and Motivation in Municipalities

In recent years, more enlightened municipal management is encouraged that will adopt a more positive approach when engaging staff (Pickard, 2011). Studies have shown that motivating staff through means of intimidation or fear of reprisal do not achieve long term results (Herzberg, 1987) and negative feedback can actually cause a lack of motivation (Stieg, 2021). A positive approach that inspires staff to be creative, adapt, and achieve growth “speeds up problem solving, leads to better solutions, improves accountability, and builds stronger organizational cultures” (Pickard, 2011).

While money is not often a motivator for staff, it is not an area that management has much flexibility due to possible financial constraints enacted by Council or limited discretionary funding in their budgets. Therefore, municipal managers need to be creative in how they address motivation. Possible changes to address lower level needs or hygiene factors that will lower job dissatisfaction could be allowing work-from-home arrangements or offering flexible working hours. Changes to address higher level needs or motivators that will create job satisfaction could be offering training and development opportunities or holding employee appreciation events.

Having a sense of purpose is a big motivator for the younger generation of municipal employees, who want to feel they are making a difference in bettering society (Pinto, 2016). Responsible management integrates leadership and corporate social responsibility and involves managing relationships with the various stakeholders that are identified as having a vested interest in their business or project, as well as making sustainable business decisions that consider the “triple bottom line”: profit, people, and the environment (Doh & Quigley, 2014). By encouraging responsible management and corporate social responsibility, municipalities can create a culture that meets the needs of the younger generations and attracts the leaders of tomorrow, while also contributing to a sustainable future (Beauchamp, 2001).

Why is Motivation Important?

In a study completed by Psychometrics Canada on employee engagement and motivation in the Canadian workforce, 80.3% of government respondents indicated that engagement is a problem in their workplace and that disengaged employees negatively impact work relationships and productivity (Baker, 2011). Interestingly, the study found that disengagement did not necessarily result in higher turnover and absences; instead employees who were disengaged tended to stay within the workplace, continuing to damage relationships and productivity (Baker, 2011). Alternatively, when employees are engaged and motivated, there are a number of benefits. They are more likely to go “above and beyond”, and productivity, working relationships and customer satisfaction improves (Baker, 2011). See Figure 4.

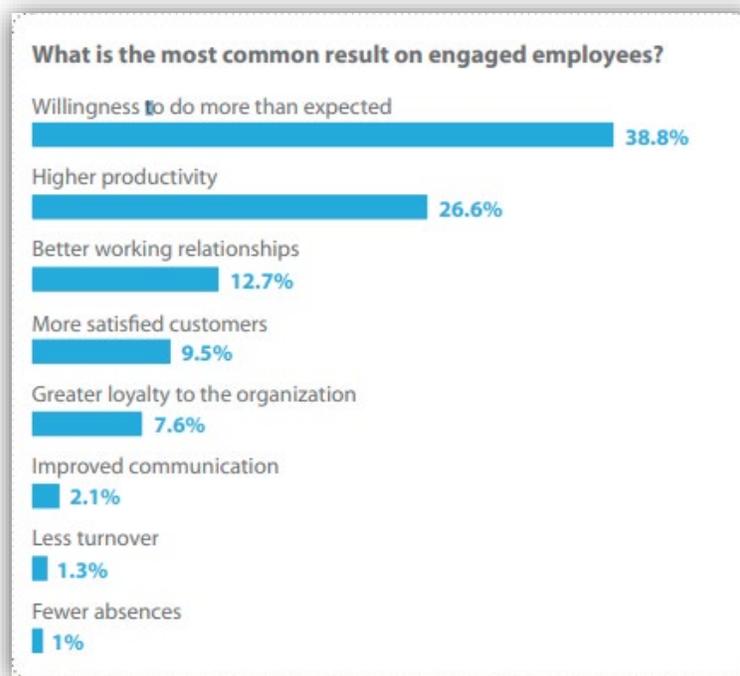


Figure 4: Benefits of Engaged Employees (Baker, 2011)

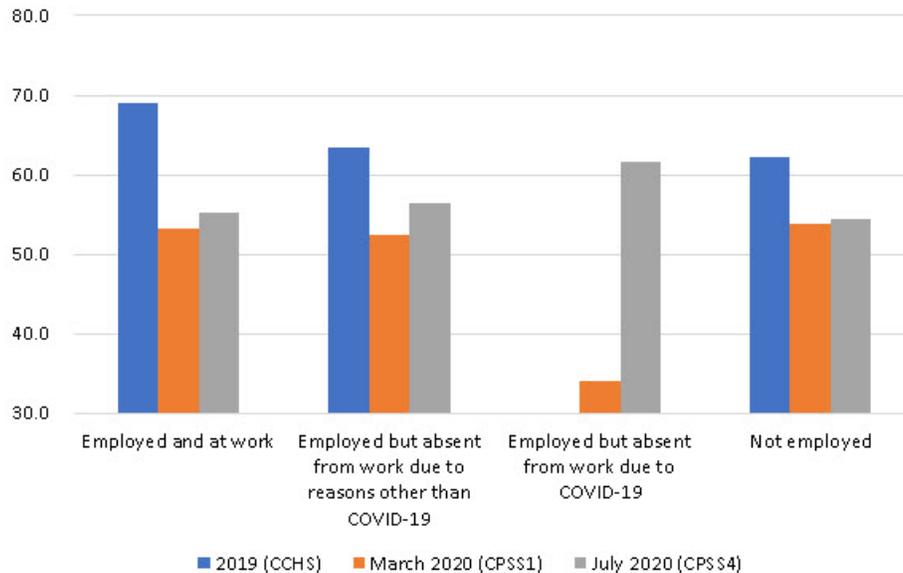
The impact of motivation and engagement on productivity is well documented and comes with a cost; it is reported that under motivated staff cost companies \$300 billion in lost productivity every year in the United States, while workplaces with higher levels of motivation can achieve an average of 43% more productivity than those workplaces with employees that are less engaged (Gaille, 2017). This is especially important for municipal governments who require an efficient and effective workforce to respond to increasing pressures to do more with less, being responsible for a majority of public infrastructure and services that keep communities healthy, safe and prosperous.

HOW HAS THE COVID PANDEMIC IMPACTED MOTIVATION?

COVID-19 is not a typical emergency “event” with an end date that can be predicted; it is an unprecedented long term crisis unlike anything we have dealt with in our lifetimes. While municipalities have emergency plans in place, they likely do not speak to employee wellness or motivation over a long haul, since emergency situations are typically resolved over a shorter time frame. Governments at all levels have been faced with an enormous challenge, having to quickly adapt to the new world we are living in and the extraordinary changes that have happened over the last year. Municipalities are counted on more than ever to continue providing essential services in the areas of public health, long term care, emergency medical services, fire and rescue, transit, and utilities, while adapting recreational and community services through the tightening and loosening of lockdown restrictions and developing remote work arrangements for administrative staff. They are expected to maintain the public’s expectations to keep taxes low while dealing with a significant loss in revenues and cash flow. These demands put an enormous strain on staffing resources as they have no choice but to perform their duties during the crisis.

Impact on Mental Health

Many staff are dealing with declining mental health, burnout, and lack of motivation personally and professionally as they deal with the effects of the pandemic. They may be experiencing anxiety, worried for their own or loved ones health, safety, and financial security, and experiencing a lack of physical interaction with family and friends through lockdown periods. A large number of staff are working from home, further increasing isolation, and making it harder to instill a team mentality. Statistics Canada has surveyed Canadians on their mental health throughout the pandemic and reports that almost one-quarter of participants indicated they were experiencing fair or poor mental health and over half reported that their mental health had declined since the onset of physical distancing (Statistics Canada, 2020). As shown in Figure 4, all employment groups have experienced a decline in mental health, with those employed and at work experiencing the largest decline.



Sources: Statistics Canada, Canadian Community Health Survey, 2019 and Canadian Perspectives Survey Series 4.

Figure 5: Proportion of Canadians reporting excellent or very good mental health pre and post COVID by employment status (Statistics Canada, 2020)

Another survey from Morneau Shepell found that those employees working from home or those doing a combination of at home and on site work due to the pandemic have experienced the lowest mental health scores, indicating that the disruption in workplace routines has had a negative impact on mental health (Morneau Shepell Inc., 2020). There has also been an impact on productivity, with almost 40% of employees less motivated at work since the pandemic began and 34% finding it more difficult to concentrate on work since before the pandemic (Morneau Shepell Inc., 2020). Those experiencing declining mental health are less willing to seek care even when Employee Assistance Programs are in place, making it important for employers to promote these programs and emphasize the importance of self care to staff (Morneau Shepell Inc., 2020).

Impact on Worker Needs

Under the Self-Development Theory, motivation decreases when our need for autonomy, competence and relationships is not met – three areas which have been “wiped out instantly” by the pandemic (Stieg, 2021). In analyzing the various worker needs explored through the Two Factor Theory by Frederick Herzberg and the Hierarchy of Needs Theory by Abraham Maslow, it is evident that every level has been impacted tremendously by COVID, leaving the potential for needs not being met depending on the employee, their position and their personal circumstances, and ultimately motivation suffering. See Figure 4 for potential impacts the COVID pandemic is having on both lower level and higher level employee needs.

| Level of Need | TWO FACTOR THEORY | HIERARCHY OF NEEDS | EXAMPLES | IMPACTS FROM THE COVID PANDEMIC |
|---------------------------|-------------------|--------------------|---------------------------|--|
| LOWER LEVEL NEEDS | Hygiene Factors | Physiological | Food, Water, Rest | Restlessness due to stress and anxiety. Food insecurity in early days of lockdowns with food hoarding. |
| | | Safety | Pay, Job Security | Fear of contracting the virus Some staff subject to layoffs or reduced hours; potential loss of benefits. Financial pressures impacting pay expectations. Frontline workers in direct contact with public, threatening their health and safety. |
| | | Love & Belonging | Relationships | Cut off from physical relationships with friends and family; those living alone dealing with isolation Increasing work-from-home requirements during lockdown periods impacting work relationships. |
| HIGHER LEVEL NEEDS | Motivators | Esteem | Feeling of accomplishment | Recognition cannot be given through employee appreciation events. Financial pressures may limit training & development opportunities. |
| | | Self-Actualization | Reaching full potential | If lower level needs are threatened, attention will be diverted and motivation cannot be sustained. |

Figure 6: Potential Impacts of the COVID Pandemic on Employee Needs

Municipal managers have extensive responsibilities beyond supervision of staff and may also be experiencing deficiencies in their own needs, leaving less energy to focus on the needs of their employees, so ensuring supports are also in place for management is vital. Municipalities are experiencing tremendous financial pressures with a loss in user fee and license revenue and an increase in costs from the pandemic response (City of Toronto, 2020) so financial resources may not be available to commit to addressing employee wellness and motivation; however, ignoring it will come with negative long-term impacts and will make it harder for municipalities to address the increased demands the pandemic has created through a loss in productivity.

HOW CAN MOTIVATION BE IMPROVED DURING THE PANDEMIC?

Motivation and engagement in the workplace is challenging in the best of times, with 69% of survey respondents indicating that it was a problem in the workplace through an engagement study done in 2010 by Psychometrics Canada (Baker, 2011). During COVID, given the impacts on mental health and disruptions to worker needs, it is likely to be a problem in most workplaces and on management's radar to address. Various options for addressing motivation will be explored, as well as a mini case study on the City of Niagara Falls analyzing what has been done and what can be improved.

Options to Consider

There are a variety of options that municipalities can consider when addressing motivation during and after the pandemic and various approaches will be reviewed. Generally, government finances are constrained during this time so management must be creative with limited resources, 'think outside the box', and be flexible where possible.

Management Training

Management's role in motivation has been emphasized, along with the positive approach that is encouraged to achieve long term results on efficiency and productivity. Effective leaders that understand the emotional part of their role is vital. Providing engagement training to management has been shown to increase the amount of engaged employees by more than 10% (Gaille, 2017). There is a plethora of quality material on these subjects available online that can be shared for free if procuring training services is not financially possible. A positive leadership culture can be developed through communicating tips and advice on how to engage and inspire staff.

Addressing Lower Level Needs / Hygiene Factors

Municipalities have been required to put numerous health and safety measures in place to meet provincial and federal requirements and to respond to employee concerns, which has addressed lower level health and safety needs of employees. Physiological needs may be lacking due to the restlessness and anxiety that comes with reduced mental health and possible ways to address this include promoting activities like meditation and yoga which improves health, reduces stress and stimulates positive thinking (Equinox Therapeutic, 2017). Employee Assistance Programs should be considered, and promoted if already in place to ensure that staff are accessing supports when suffering.

Salaries and wages may be negotiated through collective agreements for the short term, but expectations in the near future may be impacted due to the financial challenges municipalities are facing. As new terms of agreements are negotiated, salary increases may not be possible but there are plenty of other non-monetary incentives that could be utilized instead (Tindal, 2015). Offering additional days off does not cost anything for most employees and provides more personal time to staff which helps to re-energize them to perform their duties effectively.

Continuing to allow flexible hours and work from home arrangements after the pandemic ends can help staff to maintain a positive work/life balance, as well as considering reduced work weeks. Once staff return to the office, allowing “Bring Your Pet to Work” days can help to lower staffs stress levels as well as promotes a casual, friendly atmosphere that fosters stronger relationships (Craig-Bourdin, 2019).

Special attention should be paid to working relationships through team building, as work from home has isolated employees. In the short-term, activities could be planned via video conferencing applications like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, but in person activities should be considered and planned for once the pandemic ends.

Addressing Higher Level Needs / Psychological Needs / Motivators

Even staff whose lower level needs are met are likely affected by the drag of COVID. Don't ignore that staff are experiencing a lack of motivation and productivity; it should be acknowledged and addressed by offering suggestions to help cope with it. Especially important for those working from home, staff should be encouraged to establish new daily rituals to replace those damaged by the pandemic, which will help to improve self-control and self-discipline (Stieg, 2021). It is also important to recognize the efforts that staff are making during these times. Since appreciation events that are normally outlets to provide recognition to staff are not possible in the short term, other avenues should be explored to ensure employees feel appreciated.

Learning opportunities help with professional growth and there are many cost-effective options that could be provided for staff to explore their interests, both personally and professionally. For example, online platforms, like LinkedIn Learning, offer a suite of training courses in a multitude of topics on a volume based subscription that could be made available to staff at work and at home. Training budgets could be combined to achieve savings by avoiding individual registrations that are more costly.

Long-term thinking will help employees move forward with future goals and past the uncertainty and anxiety surrounding COVID in the short term, establishing more positive thinking which has a direct impact on motivation and productivity (Stieg, 2021). Goal setting should take place to keep staff on track, develop themselves professionally, and create solutions to achieve organizational objectives in the short and long term (Pickard, 2011). Deferred salary leave programs could also be considered, which provide the opportunity for employees to finance a leave from work through a deferral of their regular salary over a period of time, followed by a six month to one year leave. A policy could be established for application to such a program providing management approval.

The Bottom Line

With creative thinking, there are many programs and policies that could be put in place beyond the examples provided; however, there is no “one size fits all” approach to motivating staff. It is not a onetime event (Herzberg, 1987); it is an ongoing process that requires effective managers who can appreciate the individuality of each one of their employees and understand their own role in engagement. At a corporate level, employee engagement surveys could be undertaken to gauge employee needs and concerns overall to determine what policies and programs could be effective in engaging staff during and after COVID. Corporate policies will require flexibility so that managers can address the specific needs of their staff and tailor plans accordingly, applying their knowledge of motivational theory and what drives us to reach our full potential (Ghaffari, Shah, Burgoyne, Nazri, & Salleh, 2017).

Case Study: The City of Niagara Falls

Work from home arrangements (where possible), sign in procedures, mandatory masking, bio barriers/shields, contact tracing and enhanced cleaning were undertaken early in the pandemic, which ensured trust from employees. Mental health has also been considered, with morning meditation classes offered to staff once a week via Zoom to help employees manage stress and improve focus. Financial supports were put in place where possible, such as allowing utilization of banked/vacation time to avoid being placed on leave or layoff for those in job pools. These approaches have addressed the lower level employee needs or hygiene factors; however, under Maslow’s theory, when lower level needs are met employees will move to higher level needs, and under Herzberg’s theory, hygiene factors will reduce job dissatisfaction but do not increase satisfaction. Therefore, any results will likely be short-term or employees will expect their other higher level psychological needs/motivators to be met.

Management has made some attempts to provide recognition. Due to lockdowns and gathering restrictions, annual employee appreciation events, social events and recognition awards have not been possible over the last year. In place of these, small tokens of appreciation were sent to staff and individual efforts have been recognized in informal settings where possible. For example, the City’s Transit Maintenance team designed and installed bio barriers on the entire fleet so were presented with an Appreciation Award from the Mayor at a small divisional meeting. Such measures help to address higher level needs, psychological needs and motivators. However, if an employee is experiencing deficiencies in their lower level needs and hygiene factors, their attention will likely be focused there instead and results will be limited.

One area that requires improvement is communication. It is vital that managers maintain effective communication and share information with those that are working from home during the pandemic to ensure motivation is maintained for their staff (Wolor, Solikhah, Susita, & Martono, 2020). Since staff are not being brought together and a large amount of staff are working from home, everyone is feeling very disconnected in every way possible, especially during lockdown periods when personal relationships suffer. Besides some general emails to communicate changes and expectations, there has been no direct communication with employees from the CAO and senior management team. Instead, videos could be posted to the corporate intranet site or corporate zoom meetings could be planned for staff shout outs, offering positive reinforcement and encouragement, and providing updates on a more personal basis.

CONCLUSION

“The psychology of motivation is tremendously complex, and what has been unraveled with any degree of assurance is small indeed.”

(Herzberg, 1987)

Motivational theories have attempted to shed some light on the psychology behind motivation and how managers can decipher the various needs of their employees. Common between the theories explored from Maslow, Herzberg, Argyris, and Deci & Ryan is the idea that employees have varying levels of needs that will drive behavior, but high level psychological needs are what ultimately motivates us to achieve our full potential and what achieves long term results in employee engagement. If lower level needs are not met, focus cannot move upward; therefore, given the extensive impacts COVID has had on our lives, all needs should be considered.

Worker needs will differ based on the employee and will change over time depending on an employee's specific circumstances; therefore it is important for managers to understand that a “one size fits all” approach will not work when it comes to motivation, and addressing motivation is not a onetime event but an ongoing process that requires upkeep. It is evident that the COVID pandemic is having negative impacts on the motivation of employees and placing increasing importance on active engagement in the workplace.

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