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MOTIVATING EMPLOYEES IN A POOR PERFORMING COMPANY

A CASE OF ELVIC (PRIVATE) LIMITED, ZIMBABWE

Paul Nemashakwe

Managing Consultant, Platinum Consultancy Services, Bulawayo, Zimbabwe paulnemashakwe@gmail.com

Victor Shumba 🖾

Department of Business Management, Lupane State University, Zimbabwe vshumba2010@gmail.com

Abstract

The study sought to investigate the impact of motivation on employees in a poor performing company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe (that we assigned a pseudonym Elvic (Private) Limited). Guided by the main objective of explaining the effectiveness of motivation strategies employed by the company during the period 2009 to 2014, we sought to identify the motivation strategies employed by Elvic (Private) Limited before seeking to analyse their impact on performance. Using descriptive research design, data was gathered by means of structured questionnaires targeted at 32 employees of Elvic. The results from the study showed that motivation has a positive impact on the company, its employees and enhances satisfaction and retention. Based on the results, we recommend that companies should establish the most preferred strategies of motivating employees even in times of distress.

Keywords: Motivation, Employees, Poor performing company, Organizational performance

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important goals of any organisation is to maximize employee performance in order to achieve organizational goals. It is necessary to maintain high levels of motivation wherever possible, not only to aid and increase productivity but also to assist the psychological well-being of individuals.



In the 1920s the infamous 'Hawthorne effect' was discovered from research conducted at the Western Electric Company in the USA. A number of experiments were held on a control group of workers. One of the experiments concerned the effect of lighting on productivity and involved increasing and decreasing the lighting in the workplace. The result was surprising, because the researchers found that productivity increased in both circumstances. The researchers concluded that the increase in productivity was not specifically caused by changes to the lighting but was due to the fact that there had been an intervention because the workers felt involved in the process. Motivation intrigued people then, and it continues to do so now (Harrison, 2011).

According to Buelens (2006) effective employee motivation and satisfaction has been one of management's most difficult and most important duties. People must be motivated if they are to effectively engage in the behaviours and practices that bring advantages and success to a firm (Hitt et al, 2011).

When a company is not performing well, it requires different strategies which in turn require different types of people and behaviour and therefore different approaches to motivation and empowerment. Poor performance requires people to think differently if the company is to extricate itself from the problems. In such circumstances there is need for employees who are prepared and allowed to experiment, accept responsibility and appreciate the learning experience gained from previous failed efforts.

To fully motivate and empower such people, resources for trying new ideas must be made available, including time. Opportunities to develop new skills and polish old ones are important. Recognition for success and pats on the back for efforts that unexpectedly did not bear fruit also might be useful. Pay, while important often takes a back seat (Hitt et al, 2011).

In support of their notion to deviate from the traditional monthly or weekly pay checks, Hitt et al (2011) explained that there were many ways to motivate people, hence there was no simple answer to the question of what managers should do to increase and sustain their associates' motivation. However, Buelens (2006) argued that success in this endeavour was becoming more challenging in the light of organizational trends to downsize the workforce and re-engineer activities and the demands associated with managing a diverse workforce.

It is widely believed that contented cows give more milk (Catlette and Hadden, 2012). If companies do not just want their employees to like their jobs, but to love them, they should make sure that they do everything in their power to keep employees content. Innovative companies are increasingly experimenting with alternative, creative techniques to create an overtly enthusiastic workforce.

Elvic (Private) Limited (not its real name) a marketing company in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe used to enjoy considerable market share particularly in the cutlery manufacturing business prior to 2009 as it was the only known cutlery manufacturing company in Zimbabwe. Competition from imports particularly from China and South Africa was still suppressed to an extent that the company enjoyed comfortable profits, unlike most of Zimbabwean companies then.

Because of brisk business, employees were paid competitive salaries on time. A number of employee benefit schemes that included medical aid, holiday allowances and payment of school fees for employees' children were in place to ensure that employees were motivated and satisfied. Because of the performance of the company, it was possible and easy to ensure that employees were motivated and engaged such that there were no visible signs of disgruntlement or discontent.

In 2009, the ownership and leadership of the company changed and the fortunes of the company began to reverse. Because of the adoption of the multi-currency system, Zimbabwe became a fertile market for cheap imports from a number of countries particularly China and South Africa such that the market was flooded with cheap imports making it difficult for the company to find a ready market for its products.

Customers who had previously bought products from the company began to look for cheap imported products. To compound the problem, the company was unable to source raw materials and would fail to supply orders of loyal customers who had remained with the company. Because of the shortage of liquidity in the market, companies that received goods on credit failed to pay thereby squeezing the already precarious cash position of the company and exacerbating the already bad outlook of the company.

The company responded by slashing some of the benefits that had made employees happy, like medical aid and payment of children's school fees. In no time, the company began to delay the payment of salaries first by a couple of days, then weeks. Before employees could really understand what had hit them, the company was sometimes paying half salaries when the situation was better and sometimes going for two to three months without paying anything when the situation was really bad. Employee numbers fell from 105 to 32 in 5 years and other assets were liquidated to settle various obligations.

Statement of the Problem

There is no dispute that most employees wake up in the morning to go to work expecting that at the end of the month they will receive a salary that will enable them to meet their day to day human needs. Traditionally and particularly in less developed economies like Zimbabwe, motivation has been known to emanate to a larger extent from the salary and benefits that employees receive. In a situation where a company is performing poorly to an extent that it fails to meet its monthly obligations of paying employee salaries and widely expected benefits have become an expensive luxury it becomes nightmarish to manage performance and even motivate the workers. Given the foregoing it is instructive to do an exploratory study to find how companies caught in this mess motivate their employees.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The term motivation was derived from the Latin word movere (Buelens et al, 2006; Tiernam et al, 2006; Quick and Nelson, 2009) or motum (Kroth 2007) meaning to move. Motivation was defined by Robbins (1996:212) as "the willingness to exert high levels of effort toward organisational goals, conditioned by the effort's ability to satisfy some individual need" while Robbins and Judge (2013:236) defined it as the "process that account for an individual's intensity, direction and persistence of effort towards attaining a goal".

From the manager's view point, the objective is to motivate people to behave in ways that are in the organisation's best interest. Kreitner & Kinicki (2008) in their analysis suggested that employee motivation for a long time has been one of management's most difficult and important duties. Many scholars as posited by Moorhead & Griffin (2001) agreed that the genesis of motivation is a need, some internal state that makes certain outcomes appear attractive and something an individual requires or wants.

An unsatisfied need creates tension that will stimulate drives within the individual (Robbins, 1996). These drives generate a search behaviour to find particular goals that if attained will satisfy the need and lead to the reduction of tension. In the same vein Moorhead & Griffin (2001) explained that motivated behaviour usually begins when a person has one or more important needs.

While many authors only talked about an unsatisfied need, Moorhead & Griffin(2001) took a step further and argued that a need that is already satisfied may also motivate, although there is agreement that unmet needs usually result in more intense feelings and behavioural changes. Scholars on motivation agree that motivation should be seen as a process that begins with the recognition of an unsatisfied need, creating tension within the individual concerned that can only be reduced with the satisfaction of the need.

Intrinsic and Extrinsic Motivation

Intrinsic motivation refers to the performance of a task for the inherent satisfaction it brings an individual rather than for some separate consequence. This type of motivation appears to combine elements of Weiner's (1974; 1980; 1986) attribution theory, Bandura's (1977; 1993) work on self-efficacy and other studies related to goal orientation (Rakes and Dunn, 2010).

In contrast, extrinsic motivation occurs when employees are able to satisfy their needs indirectly, most importantly through monetary compensation (Osterloh et al, 2006). The authors further explain that money as such does not provide direct utility but serves to acquire desired goods and services, an assumption which is basic to all economic analysis.

Lai (2009) cited in Hossain & Hossain (2012) explained that employees who are more intrinsically motivated are likely to be high in self-esteem, optimistic, willing to work harder, participative at work, work efficiently, have lower absenteeism rates and be more generally satisfied with their jobs.

Extrinsically motivated coordination in firms is achieved by linking employees' monetary motives to the goals of the firm. Awards are extrinsic incentives and serve as direct motivators when people exert effort explicitly to win the award (Frey and Neckermann, 2009).

Extrinsic motivation focuses on the goal-driven reasons while intrinsic motivation indicates the pleasure and inherent satisfaction derived from a specific activity (Lin, 2007). Furnham et al (1998) cited in Keijzers (2010) argued that introverts are more extrinsically motivated while extroverts are more intrinsically motivated.

Intrinsic and extrinsic motivations have an effect on each other. Deci (1972) cited in Keijzers (2010) claimed that in some cases extrinsic motivators could decrease intrinsic motivation. The author argued that if money was administered contingently it decreased intrinsic motivation. But this would not occur if the money was not contingently distributed.

Amabile (1993) cited in Keijzers (2010) argued that intrinsic and extrinsic motivation can have a reinforcing effect: "once the scaffolding of extrinsic motivation is taken care of, intrinsic motivation can lead to high levels of satisfaction and performance".

Amabile et al (1994) cited in Hadjiphanis (2012) found that people can be concurrently intrinsically and extrinsically motivated such that managers should use a mixture of methods (monetary rewards, praise, recognition) to effectively motivate employees and promote job satisfaction in the work place.

Story et al (2009) cited in Keijzers (2010) argued that individuals high in intrinsic motivation seemed to prefer challenging cognitive tasks and could self-regulate their behaviours, so offering rewards, setting external goals or deadlines did little for them unless they were also high in extrinsic motivation. For employees high in intrinsic motivation, emphasis could be placed on the engaging nature of the task and encouragement of self-set goals and deadlines.

The Motivating Power of Money

Earlier writers such as F.W Taylor believed in economic needs motivation. Workers would be motivated by obtaining the highest possible wages through working in the most efficient and productive way. For Taylor, motivation was a comparatively simple issue-what the workers wanted from their employers more than anything else were high wages (Mullins, 2013).

In his work, Akintoye (2000) cited in Ghazanfar et al (2011) emphasized that money remained the most important motivational strategy. Money possessed significant motivating power in as much as it symbolized intangible goals like security, power, prestige and a feeling of accomplishment and success.

Several researches have suggested that employees underestimate how powerful a motivator pay is to them. Colquitt et al (2009) argued that financial incentives almost always had a stronger impact on motivation than other sorts of outcomes. Money has the power to attract, retain, and motivate individuals towards higher performance (Tella et al, 2007).

Tiernan et al (2006) explained that if money was to become a valued reward, employees must believe that good performance would allow them to realize that reward. This suggested that pay should be linked to performance and differences in pay should be large enough to adequately reward high performance.

Rynes et al, (2004) argued that individual pay for performance schemes were most important to high academic achievers, high performing employees and individuals with high selfefficacy and high need for achievement. In addition pay was more important to extroverts than introverts.

Mullins (2010) noted that for the vast majority of people, money was clearly important and a motivator at work but to what extent and how important depended upon their personal circumstances and the other satisfactions they derived from work. The bottom line is surely the extent to which money motivates people to work well and to the best of their abilities.

Relationship between Motivation and Performance

For a company to be successful, it needs the workforce that can act strongly for the achievement of organisational goals and also have a strong urge to remain loyal to the company (Molander, 1996). For such devotion and dedication the key remains the motivation (Ghazanfar et al, 2011).

Motivation is the driving force that makes people willingly want to put in their best in whatever they do (Saleem, et al 2010). Silva (2007) argued that motivation is the key to employee performance. The author explained that if employees are motivated, then an organisation can get whatever results they like. Moreover motivation is expected to accomplish work productivity and job satisfaction (Schultz and Schultz, 1998; cited in Ghazanfar et al, 2011).

Although a number of factors contribute to productivity, Re'em (2010) argued that work motivation influences an employee's effort toward performing work which in turn influences productivity. The author suggested that for employees to perform well, firstly they must have the knowledge and skills that are required for the job, understand what they are required to do and in addition have the motivation to expand effort.

Employees who are motivated enjoy their work, care about the quality of their work and generally enthusiastically embrace their duties and responsibilities resulting in superior performance (Mayhew, 2011). The author suggested that a blend of monetary and nonmonetary recognition as well as feedback improved performance drastically.

Ghazanfar et al. (2011) argued strongly that employees with a high level of motivation tended to work hard and performed better in their work as compared to employees with low levels of motivation. McClelland (1984) cited in Salleh et al (2011) reported significant relationship between job performance and power motivation which suggested that employees with high power motivation would perform better.

Colquitt et al (2009) believes that motivation has a strong positive effect on job performance. People who experience higher levels of motivation tend to have higher levels of task performance. These effects are strongest for self-efficacy/ competence, because people who feel a sense of internal self-confidence tend to outperform those who doubt their capabilities.

Saleem et al (2010) argued that it was better to motivate employees as it was believed that the driving force which resulted from motivation would compel people to put in their best out of willingness. Lai (2009) cited in Hossain and Hossain (2012:21) explained the outcome of motivated employees as including "low turnover, loyalty and harmony, high performance that contributes significantly to the growth and development of the company". Conversely, lack of motivation among the employees leads to poor performance, high employee turnover which makes the attainment of the goals of the organisation unrealistic and unachievable.

Linz (1990) cited in Kiruja and Mukuru (2013) revealed that several studies had found that there were positive relationships between intrinsic motivation and job performance as well as intrinsic motivation and job satisfaction. This is significant to institutions in today's highly competitive business environment in that intrinsically motivated employees will perform better and therefore be more productive and also because satisfied employees will remain loyal to their institution and feel no pressure or need to move to a different institution.

Mulwa (2003) cited in Kiruja and Mukuru (2013) conducted a study on employee performance in public audit institutions in Kenya and found that motivation was key for the productivity, profitability and sustainability of every institution as the employees were its movers and its life blood.

METHODOLOGY

We used a cross sectional descriptive research design targeted at a Bulawayo Manufacturing and Marketing company pseudo-named Elvic (Private) Limited. To gather primary data, structured pretested questionnaires were administered to 32 employees. Firstly all the questionnaires were made identifiable and given a title and a distinctive number. Secondly all questionnaires had provision for the recording of basic respondent data as a basis for subsequent classification and to permit comparative analysis with other surveys. The questionnaire was designed in a logical structure, made up of well thought, open ended and closed ended questions that elicited the information required to provide answers to the problem under investigation. The structure of the questionnaire ensured a flow from question to question and from topic to topic.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Response Rate & Demographic Profile

A response rate of 81.3 % was achieved.

19.2 % of the respondents were either managers or supervisors while 80.8% were non managerial employees. In terms of gender, male respondents accounted for 76.9% while 23.1% were female respondents. The largest group of respondents was aged 45 years and above (53, 8 percent) followed by those aged 35 – 44 years (23, 1 percent). Respondents in the 26-34 age group made up about 15, 4 percent while the smallest group was those aged less than 25 years who only represented 7, 7 percent of the respondents.

Data collected showed that 38.5% of the respondents completed educational level below ordinary level while 26.9% completed ordinary level education. College graduates represented 11.5% while 23.1% of the respondents had at least a university degree. 34.6% of the respondents had been with Elvic (Private) Limited for less than 5 years while 11.5% had been employed for a period between 5 and 10 years. Respondents who had been employed for a period of more than 10 years but less than 20 years accounted for 15.4% while 38.5% had been with the company for more than 20 years.

Motivation Strategies Desired by Employees

In line with one of the objectives of the study, employees were asked to list five things that highly motivated them at work. 100 percent of the respondents chose salary although the order of listing differed from employee to employee. 88, 5 percent stated they were highly motivated by good working conditions while 76, 9 percent were highly motivated by incentives. 65, 4 percent of the respondents listed understanding supervisors as their desired motivator while 57, 7 percent chose opportunities for growth. Only a few employees in the 45 and above age category chose opportunities for growth as their desired motivator.

The fact that 100 percent of employees chose money as a motivator showed that indeed money is still regarded by employees as a motivator although the importance they place on it varies from employee to employee. Based on the prevailing economic condition in the country it is understandable that every employee is motivated by money as it is the means of survival. Even those employees who have managed to satisfy all their lower order needs will also require money for the satisfaction of higher order needs like status. In Zimbabwe it is money that gives you status as you can use money to drive luxury vehicles, live in affluent suburbs and wear designer clothes, things that bring status to a larger extent in the country.

Clearly analysing the results of the study showed that respondents were motivated both by extrinsic and intrinsic motivators. If employees are to be properly motivated, there is need to first understand what they desire in terms of motivation as employees are motivated by different variables. There is no one size fits all as what motivates employee A is different from what motivates employee B. Secondly a blend of intrinsic and extrinsic motivators should be offered. While money motivates employees it will not work in isolation but together with other variables like opportunities for growth and good supervision.

Effort- Performance Expectancy

Respondents were asked if they believed that the likelihood of being rated as a higher performer were high if they worked hard. 19.3% of the respondents answered this question in the affirmative while 11.5% indicated that the likelihood was there sometimes. 69.2% of the respondents indicated that there was no likelihood at all of being rated as a high performer when they worked hard. This indicated that the performance expectancy of 80.7% of the respondents was very low.

All the respondents who did not attain ordinary level education answered this question in the negative showing that there is a strong correlation between education and effortperformance expectancy. Lack of skills also contributed to the low effort-performance expectancy. Employees without skills believed that no matter how they performed chances were very low of them being rated as high performers.

The other reason why employees believed that they would be regarded as poor performers even when they worked very hard was the way performance was being rated. Employees believed that the criteria used to rate performance were so subjective that performers would be rated as non-performers in certain instances while non-performers would be rated as performers.

Performance- Reward Expectancy

Respondents were asked whether high performance usually led to the rewards they valued. None of the respondents indicated that high performance led to the rewards they valued. 26.9% of the respondents indicated that high performance sometimes led to the rewards they valued while 73.1% stated that high performance did not lead to the rewards they valued.

There was uncertainty about employees being rewarded if they performed well. This was so because the organization rewarded a lot of things that were not performance related. Things like seniority, attendance and quantity of work rather than quality were used to reward employees such that employees lost confidence in performance being the criterion for reward.

Customization of Rewards

Respondents were asked whether rewards and recognition programmes were customised to meet individual needs. 100% of the respondents answered this question in the negative showing that rewards and recognition programmes were not customised to meet individual needs.

The company employed a one size fits all strategy when it came to dispensing rewards to employees. There was no room for employees to choose the type of reward they preferred. Giving uniform rewards might not achieve total motivation as employees are different. What one employee favors is different from what another employee favors such that sometimes giving an employee what they do not like might actually work against the company.

This same question was redirected to supervisors and managers in trying to ascertain whether they tailored rewards to individual needs. 100% of the respondents indicated that they did not tailor rewards to individual needs. The major reason given was the difficulty in the administration of different rewards at the same time and the fact that the company was even failing to give basic rewards to employees so it was impossible to tailor rewards to individual needs.

Money as a Motivator

In order to ascertain the motivating power of money respondents were asked whether they believed money was one of the most important motivations for the continuous employee performance. 73.1% of the respondents totally agreed with the assertion while 15.4% somehow agreed. 7.7% of the respondents somehow disagreed that money was the most important motivation for the continuous employee performance while 3.8% totally disagreed.

Money plays an important role in the motivation of employees at work. However its effect on the continuous employee performance is debatable. 11.5% of the respondents who disagreed that money was one of the most important motivations for the continuous employee performance argued during further probe that although they believed in the motivating power of money, they were skeptical about its continuous effect after a certain level.

In order to analyse the treatment of employees at the company, respondents were asked whether they were treated fairly in relation to others. 11.6% of the respondents said they were always treated fairly in relation to other employees while 19.2% were of the view that their treatment was sometimes fair and sometimes unfair. 69.2% of the respondents stated that they were never treated fairly in relation to other employees.

A closer analysis of the findings showed that four-fifths of the respondents who attained education level below ordinary level said they were never treated fairly in relation to other employees. The perception of unfair treatment was fuelled by the perception that supervisors and managers favoured subordinates who hailed from their tribes or regions than other subordinates.

When analysed in terms of gender, 83.3% of female respondents believed that they were never treated fairly in relation to other employees while 65% of male respondents said they were never treated fairly. This showed that female employees were so particular about issues of equity at work than their male partners.

Participation in Goal Setting

Respondents were asked whether they performed better when they participated in the setting of objectives or when they were given objectives by their supervisors. 30.8% of the respondents indicated that they performed better when they participated in the setting of objectives while 57.7% indicated that they were comfortable with receiving the objectives from their supervisors. 11.5% of the respondents indicated that they were comfortable with either participating or being given objectives by their supervisors.

All the respondents who indicated that they were comfortable with receiving objectives from supervisors had attained education level up to ordinary level or below indicating that those without advanced education were likely to shy away from participating in the setting of objectives.

The Motivating Power of Feedback

In order to determine the motivating power of feedback, respondents were asked how feedback was given to them in the event that they had done an unsatisfactory job. Only 3.9% of the respondents indicated that feedback was given in private while 26.9% indicated that feedback was given to co-workers. 69.2% of the respondents said that they were given feedback in front of their co-workers.

Managers and supervisors preferred to give negative feedback in front of other employees as a way of showing other employees that unsatisfactory performance would not be tolerated. They also preferred sometimes to give positive feedback in front of co-workers as a way of encouraging other employees to emulate the good example of performance.

As a follow up respondents were asked how they preferred to be given feedback. Respondents were unanimous that if the feedback was negative they would rather receive it in private while if the feedback was positive they loved to receive it in front of their co-workers. This showed that employees liked to be portrayed in a positive way to other employees. Phrases like negative feedback should be given behind closed doors were often used to show that employees were keen on protecting their self-image and self-esteem. Giving negative feedback in public is like dressing the employee down.

Involvement in Decision Making

57.7% of the respondents believed that management should involve employees in decisions that affect their work while 42.3% believed that managers should not involve employees in the decisions that affect their work.

36.4% of the respondents who said managers should not involve their employees in the decisions that affect their work were either supervisors or managers while 63.6% were in the 45 and above age category. 100% of respondents who did not agree that employees should be included in the decisions that affect their work had completed educational level below ordinary level showing that desire to participate in decision making was strongly linked to education.

Supervisors and managers disagreed because they did not trust the capacity of their employees to make sound and good quality decisions. When employees make bad decisions it is supervisors who are ultimately accountable for those decisions hence the scepticism was understandable although not condoned.

Relationship between Motivation and Employee Performance

In order to identify the relationship between motivation and employee performance, respondents were asked what Elvic (Private) Limited should do if they were to work hard and improve their performance. A number of initiatives were suggested which were similar to the strategies that highly motivated respondents. 100% of the respondents said the company should pay good salaries and pay them on time while 88.5% said good working conditions should be the prerequisite for them to increase their performance.

84.6% of the respondents said giving them incentives would motivate them to increase their performance while 65.4% opted for good relationships with supervisors and colleagues. 46.2% were of the view that the company should avail opportunities for growth for them to work hard and improve their performance.

An analysis of the findings revealed that motivation and employee performance were related. If employees were to perform hard they needed to be highly motivated. Highly motivated employees are prepared to go an extra mile and can be an answer to a company's problems.

CONCLUSION

The motivation of employees is strongly related to the performance of the company. Where a company is not performing very well chances are high that even the motivation of employees will be in disarray. When a company is performing poorly, traditional motivating tools like money and benefits are quickly sacrificed thereby negatively affecting the effectiveness of employee motivation. However, it was also noted that where a company performs poorly in terms of finance, other motivating strategies that are non-monetary tend to suffer as managers' panic and engage in fire fighting. We concluded that poor performance of the organisation negatively affects the motivation of employees.

Based on the results it is recommended that companies should undertake studies to ascertain incentives highly preferred by employees before implementing motivation strategies. In cases where monetary benefits are dwindling due to various reasons non monetary ways of motivation can be used like effective communication and feedback, employee empowerment, job design, recognizing good work among others.

LIMITATIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Major limitation of the research are that some information could not be released because it was classified as highly confidential and due to lack of trust of the researcher's intentions, there was less than maximum cooperation from respondents. The research was confined to Elvic (Private) Limited domiciled in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. A fruitful extension of this work can be done with comparisons between companies in different localities and across different industries.

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