

# Motivating Your Staff

## Small Investments equal large rewards!

By Marcy Hemminger

“A successful early childhood program that is a nurturing place for children must also be a good place for staff to work.” These words from Joan Klinkner, Dave Riley and Mary Roach struck a chord within me when I was researching ways to motivate staff members. As a director, one of many challenges I faced was in dealing with staff turnover and keeping my teachers energized and goal oriented. I quickly learned the connection between staff happiness and staff longevity. If the employees are happy, they remain, but if they are not happy, they either leave or try to make everyone else as miserable as they are! Neither of those solutions helps me and so it has been important to find methods to help all of the staff members be motivated and enthusiastic.

So, how do we motivate our staff to work hard and stay with us? Well...you can't ...but you can create a place, a feeling and/or an attitude where staff can become or stay motivated.

Through experience and research, I've discovered that there are six key components to motivating employees:

1. **Build professional commitment** - Staff can be motivated when they discover a well-defined philosophy and one that they can articulate to others. Can they answer questions such as “Why are you working here? What do you hope to offer? What do you hope to gain?” Once employees know what drives them to be working with children, it helps to build that commitment to stay within the industry. You can be a powerful influence to help them discover that philosophy.
2. **Enhance team building** - Staff can be motivated when they build trust with their peers and coworkers. When employees develop relationships within the workplace, they will be motivated to keep those relationships and work to keep things amicable and productive. Everyone wants to belong to something or someone, so let them belong to you! Make it seem as though being a team member of your school or center is THE place to be. Staff members are also motivated when they earn respect from their peers, administrators and the families that they serve. Show them how to earn this respect and acknowledge their successes.
3. **Provide communication avenues** - Research shows that it is highly motivating for employees to have opportunities for input when decisions need to be made. Communication is critical in any workplace and staff members are motivated and empowered when they know that their ideas are listened to. Conversely, feeling that one has no voice or that ideas are rejected can be a real moral buster. To boost motivation, staff persons need to understand and experience that communication is consistent and ongoing between administration and staff, between staff members and between staff members and families.
4. **Demonstrate appreciation** - Nothing can be more motivating than feeling appreciated! No matter what your position, employees need to hear that they are important, see that they are important and then receive recognition for that importance. They should receive that recognition individually and publicly as often as possible and for the little things as well as the big things.
5. **Provide support** - When you provide your staff with the tools they need to fulfill their philosophies and reach their goals, they will be motivated and loyal! This can be done by supplying curriculum resources and materials, encouraging innovations, encouraging research and providing and supporting education and training. Staff members also need to know that you will provide support by being on their side; especially when communication and relationship

issues arise. Nothing can undermine your program more quickly than when an employee has felt or witnessed someone being alone to defend themselves against a parent, child or other employee. Yet when they experience your support through words, actions and deeds, it not only builds the team, it builds respect.

6. **Have clear expectations and guidelines** – Another undermining event is when your employees are unsure of the policy or behavioral boundaries or feel that those boundaries are variable. When staff members feel that the rules change, it creates a sense of insecurity and that insecurity cuts way from the support they need, team building efforts and even communication avenues. In other words, you can do the 5 previous components to motivate staff, but if you neglect having clear expectations and guidelines, your other efforts may go unnoticed.

In a recent workshop when I was presenting this topic, a director commented that her biggest struggle was to motivate staff that had been working in the same jobs for 10 plus years. She voiced the difficulty in keeping that motivation alive and well. These staff members are in the “autopilot” mode. They know enough about the job to be able to do it with ease and confidence, but it’s lost its excitement. At this stage, employees are comfortable and complacent. Although these employees are generally a valuable asset to your program, they can also be a liability – for themselves, and for the people that work with them. They often discourage innovation, education and training as they are comfortable and resistant to change at this point in their lives.

Here are some tips to rejuvenate that group of tired or complacent teachers:

- **Present new challenges** – Many people have a self-competitive spirit and so offering a new challenge can be just the catalyst for moving employees from complacency to motivation. I heard that one center developed a monthly bulletin board contest. The rules were that the bulletin boards had to be child centered and/ or driven in both concept and display pieces. The teachers developed the criteria and did the voting. This director noted that everyone got into the competition and rose to the challenge. The bonus effect was that general lessons improved as well. The creative thought process extended far beyond the single project concept to a way of learning throughout the month.
- **Invite outsiders to join the team** – infusing new people with fresh ideas can spur unmotivated employees. Often the enthusiasm of some can spread to everyone. If the team of 2’s teachers seems complacent and has lost their proactive approach to dealing with issues, invite the team of 4’s teachers to sit in with them on planning and/or training. The sharing of ideas may get the 2’s team excited about their classroom and teaching strategies again. How about a new trainer or speaker? Bringing in a new perspective or set of ideas can motivate teachers very effectively.
- **Create a creativity-inducing space** – Are there places where staff can work, think, plan and prepare effectively? As a new director many years ago, I asked the teachers to offer suggestions of ways to improve our spaces. A resounding call for a “teacher’s lounge” was made and, although we did not have any extra rooms, we created a little niche at the end of a hallway. We added a table, chairs, pretty placemats and lighting and a screen for privacy. This little act contributed to their ability to think. A place away from all of the busy noise in the classroom.

When making your plan to energize your teachers, first consider these common myths about staff motivation:

- **“I can’t motivate people.”** Although this is technically true because motivation comes from within, there are many things that can be done to develop an environment where the opportunity for motivation can grow.
- **“Money is a good motivator.”** Some people are motivated by money, which is evident by all of the TV game shows and the basis for many reality shows, and some are not. It may be a mistake to assume that since it works for some, it works for all.

- **“Fear is a good motivator.”** This is actually true and you can probably think of many instances in which it has worked for you, but the research shows that it generally is only effective for the short term and, if it is used too often, becomes ineffective or creates the opposite in which employees try to purposely undermine your efforts.
- **“I know what motivates me, therefore I know what motivates my staff.”** Just like the money, what motivates you may motivate others, but it may not as well. The only truly successful way to find out what motivates others is to ask them!
- **“Increased job satisfaction means increased job performance.”** This sounds reasonable, but these two are not necessarily in conjunction with one another. Remember those teachers that have worked many years in one location and are on autopilot? They are generally very content with their jobs and want to keep it that way. They often resist ways to improve job performance because that may mean a change is necessary and they are not interested in a change.
- **“I can’t comprehend staff motivation – it’s a science!”** It can seem as though there is a complex formula for finding out the things that energize and inspire your employees, but I think that it boils down to 3 words: ask, observe, and experiment. Ask them what encourages them, observe their work habits and events or situations in which they seem to be inspired, and experiment. Try a variety of motivators – did they work and for whom? Who did not seem to be motivated by your efforts? By doing all three, your chances for success will increase dramatically!

Peter Davies states, “Motivation is like food for the brain. You cannot get enough in one sitting, it needs continual and regular top ups.” So what are some simple and inexpensive things that can be done to “top up” your staff members?

- **Provide free time and flexibility.** Whether allowing an early dismissal, an extra paid day or to adjust work hours to meet family needs, having some control over time worked is a great motivator. Many directors find that providing a “birthday” holiday or accruing comp time helps to build that sense of loyalty and job commitment that can be elusive these days.
- **Smile when you are talking.** It sounds so simple and yet sends the powerful message that you like them! Many of us are people pleasers and will perform even better/harder to make someone happy. Let that someone be you by showing how much you enjoy having them on your team.
- **Talk 20% and listen 80%.** This is something that I struggle with, but when I’ve actually done it, have reaped big rewards. Again, it sends the message that “you are important” when you take the time to listen to what others are saying. It also appears to be human nature for us to fill in silence and so you will find out more about your teachers as they reveal their thoughts and ideas when they fill that silence with information.
- **Offer sincere flattery every day to your staff.** The key word here is sincere! Find something nice to say almost every day. How they look, how they’ve handled a difficult situation, a lesson idea, prompt responses to your questions, etc. Just as it works for our children, the more we hear flattery and praise, the more we want to earn it or live up to it.
- **Celebrate important milestones and accomplishments.** Many of us remember to celebrate birthdays and work anniversaries, but how about marriage anniversaries, a first parent conference, the first referral for special education, etc? How about celebrating educating the rooth child taught? It is these unexpected celebrations that may be more meaningful and provide the biggest source of motivation.
- **Get out of their way.** By allowing your teachers to be in charge of their own classrooms is a great gift that motivates – especially the creative and energetic ones. No one likes a micromanaging

style which erodes the self-belief values you should be encouraging. So, unless there are licensing or policy issues, get out of the way and let them do the job as they see fit.

- **Recognize efforts AND results.** I spoke with a director recently that was debating on how to respond to an employee that was struggling over the lesson plan guidelines of the center. The teacher was making progress, but still had ways to go before meeting her goal and the agreed deadline was looming ahead. The director was not sure how to handle the situation – reinforce the attempt or punish the result? When it was revealed that this particular teacher had the potential to be a great teacher and had already made important connections with the children and families, it was easy to tell her to reward the effort. That, I felt, would motivate her to continue striving towards her goal. Punishing the result would probably drive this teacher away from the program altogether.

Here is a list of more incentives you can offer:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Applause</li> <li>▪ Have a lunch, dessert or snack in their honor</li> <li>▪ Certificate of achievement or accomplishment</li> <li>▪ Your time</li> <li>▪ Job titles or leadership roles</li> <li>▪ Changing the work environment with:             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ New furniture</li> <li>○ Flowers or plants</li> <li>○ Classroom supplies</li> <li>○ Curriculum resources</li> </ul> </li> <li>▪ Paid time off</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Casual/Special or thematic dress day</li> <li>▪ Theme contests for lesson planning, bulletin boards or room decorations</li> <li>▪ Pizza/popcorn/cookie/dessert days</li> <li>▪ Gags and gimmicks such as an “Employee Roast” or silly representative gifts</li> <li>▪ Stress management class</li> <li>▪ Free training</li> <li>▪ Social gatherings away from the workplace</li> <li>▪ Specialized awards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Gift cards</li> <li>▪ Bonuses</li> <li>▪ Allowed to bring things from home</li> <li>▪ Ask peers to reward</li> <li>▪ Invite friends/family when recognizing efforts</li> <li>▪ Write a note – post a note</li> <li>▪ Ownership in the company</li> <li>▪ Create “cross-linking” teams</li> </ul>
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Ironically, one of the best things that you can do to keep staff stimulated and energized is to hire good employees! So much of your work begins before you even bring an employee on board. Research shows that if you select people based on their talent for “striving, thinking and relating” you will have employees that are generally self-motivated. So when looking for new employees, ask questions that reveal these characteristics. Make sure the questions are open-ended so that they can divulge their true attitudes and remember to listen! Try questions such as these:

- Why would you like to work here?
- What is your perception of your role here?
- How would you handle an upset parent or child?
- Why do you feel you would be an asset to our program?
- What would help you improve your skills?
- How would you go about creating an educationally sound program in your classroom?
- Why have you chosen teaching as a career?

Hiring individuals that answer these types of questions to your satisfaction will bring more rewards and less headaches than those that just have the “right” education. So ask the questions, give lots of time for them to respond and remember; hire attitudes and teach skills. This proactive approach will enable you to hire employees that are motivated to do well for themselves, the children and your program and their positive attitudes may affect others that work with them.

Some final points:

1. When motivating an individual, focus on strengths.
2. To develop an employee, find the right job to fit the person.
3. Treat everyone as adults with fairness and consistency.
4. Don't create "rules" for all employees when just a few are violating the norms.
5. Help you staff to feel like members of the "in" crowd.
6. Communicate all you know when you know it.
7. Afford your staff the opportunity to grow and develop.
8. Provide leadership opportunities.
9. Remember that rewards and recognition are the most powerful tools you can use!

Now you have some of the information and tools to help you motivate your employees. With consistent and dedicated efforts, you will be able to create a warm and inclusive environment where teachers become active participants in establishing goals and objectives that encourage motivation and inspire them to bring out their best work ethics!

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#### **Resources that contributed to the ideas presented:**

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