

# When money doesn't talk

## How to keep your low-wage employees motivated and productive

Nearly all workplaces have some positions that just don't pay well. When promising a salary increase for great work isn't an option, managers need to find other ways to keep these employees motivated and productive. The following four strategies may not increase a paycheck, but they definitely can boost morale:

### Stress their importance

People want to know that what they do matters. Employees who believe their contributions are trivial have little reason to take their job seriously. Demonstrating how their role fits into the larger scheme of company operations encourages lower-paid workers to take pride in their roles.

"Low-earning jobs are usually some of the most important jobs in a company because they normally handle sanitation and the grunt work of the business," says Linda Murray Bullard, small business coach at LSMB Business Solutions, LLC.

"These positions can affect the physical health and well-being of all other employees. To keep low-earning workers motivated, convey the importance of how what they do helps the overall organization to function well."

### Treat them as part of the team

"We are instinctually drawn to teams, especially winning teams. Therefore, a manager that can create a team environment—complete with goals, competition and roles—is likely to benefit from our instinctually social nature to contribute to a team," says Matthew DiGeronimo, general manager for Veolia Energy North America.

Be sure staff members of all levels share in events such as birthday celebrations and recognition ceremonies. Solicit everyone's opinions on



workplace matters through surveys, suggestion boxes, and an open-door policy. Extend personal invitations to lower-paid workers to come to company picnics or join the softball team, and make a pointed effort to meet their families at these gatherings.

### Show interest in their future

People in low-paying jobs often have career aspirations beyond their present position. Figuring out what these goals are can provide insight into what motivates them.

"I have found it vitally important that the manager find time to talk with each person on the (low-paid) team about their future goals," DiGeronimo says.

"What steps could they be taking to improve their future prospects? What options (education, certifications, skill sets) are they interested in, and what can the manager do to help? Even if these conversations never move past words, knowing that your manager is thinking about your future and genuinely cares about you is a fire-proof tactic to maximize work productivity when pay alone won't."

### Be appreciative

Finally, remember that kind words and gestures can be the ultimate motivator. A handwritten note of thanks for a job

well done, a surprise cup of Starbucks one morning "just because," or complimenting an individual within earshot of his peers can make someone's day.

Phil Mackie, marketing coordinator for the Laguna Beach House in California, notes that a Maya Angelou quote he heard early in his management career has stuck with him: "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."

"I wasn't able to pay my staff what they were worth; it was economics. If I could, they would all have gotten substantial raises and then some," Mackie laments about his first managerial position.

"But, I could get to know their sense of humor, their favorite past-times, their most beloved family members. And in the few minutes before the chaos of each day, we would share a laugh, a quick bite to eat, or words of appreciation for one another. You may not be able to pay your most beloved staff members what they deserve, but you can always do your best to make them feel like they have a caring and competent manager who appreciates their hard work."

### Go easy on the discipline

Wield it indiscriminately—for example, coming down too hard because of a minor tardiness problem—and the trust between you could break immediately. When correcting behavior, spare the tired corporate speak and express how poor performance affects real individuals, not the company. Show them that the true injured parties are the co-workers they like and the people relying on them to earn a living.