Inspiring through incentives

Managers and people leaders are always looking for new ways to inspire their teams and maximize employee efforts, especially during tough times when productivity and employee engagement can be the advantage needed to get a leg up on the competition. But with cutbacks on spending and many workers and leaders required to do more with less, taking time and money to get employees motivated can seem like a daunting task. How can you engage employees successfully without breaking the bank or eating up precious time?

A key instrument in your tool box of employee engagement could be an employee incentive program. Giving employees a goal to strive for can create enthusiasm, encouraging them to work extra hard when you need it most.

But dangling random 'carrots' in front of your employees isn't enough: they must be the right kind of carrots. In other words, your workers need to see a value to the rewards on offer and covet them.

Why Reward Employees?

In days gone by, "command and control" organizations ruled the roost: workers were told what to do and how to do it and, in return, they were pretty much assured a job for life. Of course, much has changed in the last 30 years, with the virtual end of lifetime employment and the reality that most people will work at several organizations over their career.

Employers of choice now recognize that positive reinforcement is usually more fruitful in motivating workers to go the extra mile for their clients and company. Creating valuable and meaningful incentives can not only attract the best and brightest, it can help ensure those workers stay with the organization longer, reducing hiring and training expenses. The result is not only a more positive work environment, but a healthier bottom line.

Sensible Incentives

One of the biggest challenges in creating a rewards system is undoubtedly deciding how to reward your team. As their leader, you may feel you instinctively know what employees are looking for. You may want to try out a few different ideas of your own, but the science of surveys is often a good place to start.

Surveying is a handy tool that allows managers and supervisors a unique opportunity to get a glimpse at what really inspires their employees to work harder and go further. Depending on the size and scope of the rewards program, you may want to recruit outside help from a consultant or incentive company. In many cases though, it's not necessary: a brief paper survey or an online survey service (many are free for the most basic of surveys) is often enough to capture the information you need.

Be careful not to make the questionnaire too lengthy or vague. Give your employees different scenarios and their responses should guide you in setting up an incentive program. Short surveys are less time-consuming and can be sent out more often, ultimately providing clearer information for the direction of your rewards program.

Just because you think a tropical cruise would motivate you to do a better job, doesn't mean your team will feel the same way. Give employees distinct choices—you might be surprised in the direction that they go.

Remember too that money isn't the only option. Depending on the budget available, you might consider offering trips, time in lieu, gift certificates, a trial promotion, team party or barbecue, or organizational time to do something fun or meaningful like participating in a charity event.

Scale the rewards to the effort you require. If you need staff to put in lots of extra time over weeks to meet goals, make it worth their while.

Make your goals concrete and attainable. Outline your objectives over a specified time frame. There should be no question as to which targets were hit and which required a great deal of extra effort. Depending on your needs, goals can be structured to offer up team or individual rewards, or even both.

Publically recognizing those who reach the goal or objective is also important: people like praise for their hard work and part of the rewards program should ensure outstanding efforts are acknowledged both to the individual or team and—via e-mail, letter or announcement— department or organization-wide.

While incentives are a great way to motivate employees during crunch times or special projects, they are only one tool in your resource kit. Mutual respect, treating workers fairly and ensuring expectations are clearly defined and reasonable are ultimately the day-to-day 'carrots' that will draw employees into the fold and keep them there for the long-term.

If you require support to deal with a sensitive employee situation, contact LifeWorks·fgi to find out more about the consultation and training services your Employee Assistance Program provides.