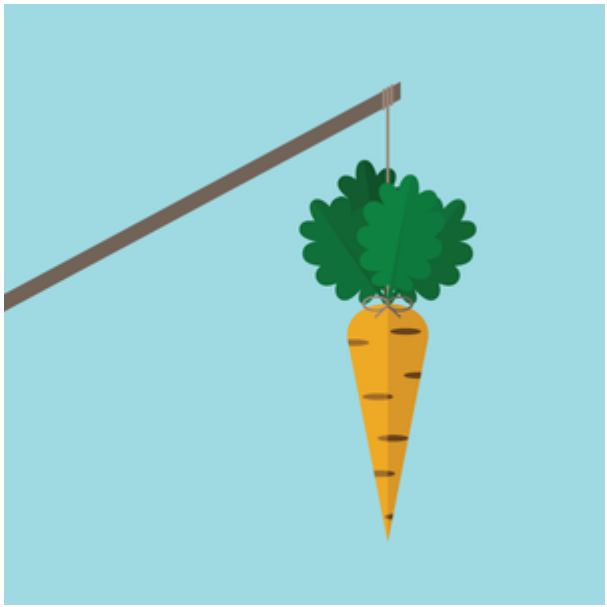
Motivation: Feeling Great About the Work You Are Doing



An article by Lisa Lai in *The Harvard Business Review*, **Motivating Employees Is Not About Carrots or Sticks**, provides some points worth considering in looking at student and educator motivation in schools.

Lai states, “I’d like to suggest a new dialogue that embraces the key concept that motivation is less about employees doing great work and more about employees feeling great about their work. The better employees feel about their work, the more motivated they remain over time. When we step away from the traditional carrot or stick to motivate employees, we can engage in a new and meaningful dialogue about the work instead.”

She provides four areas for consideration:

Share Context and Provide Relevance

There is no stronger motivation for employees than an understanding that their work matters and is relevant to someone or something other than a financial statement.

Wow! There is a great starter for our classrooms. I love the phrase, ”that their work matters.” Can students make a connection to the task they are completing and a goal they wish to achieve? Can they sense that someone will benefit from

the work they are doing? Will they have a reason to be proud of what they produce? My classroom observations too often find students focused on "getting done" what has been assigned: completion and compliance. Observing administrators might ask students, "what they are doing?" and be told the learning objective, but rarely does the student understand how the task produces learning.

Missing relevance is also too often present in teachers' PLC or department meetings. When administrators assign tasks to be completed they often get teachers' compliant work. Way too often I have been asked to present material to a staff as professional learning only to find no stage was set in having teachers understand "why" or "how" the learning would impact future school directions: no context.

Anticipate Roadblocks to Enable Progress

When you ask anything significant of team members, they will undoubtedly encounter roadblocks and challenges along the path to success. Recognize that challenges can materially impact motivation. Be proactive in identifying and addressing them.

Challenging tasks provide students with motivation. Progress toward reaching a goal fuels motivation. Teachers need to know students and empower students to receive just the right amount of scaffolding for learning at just the right time to minimize defeat and maximize successful struggle.

Rachel Dale and Jimmy Scherrer writing in **Goldilocks Discourse – math scaffolding that's just right** illustrate:

- Too little scaffolding: unsystematic exploration.
- Too much scaffolding: constraining opportunities to persevere.
- The right amount of scaffolding: productive struggle.

School leaders need to know staff to create similar "Goldilocks" scaffolding for individual teachers and

individual PLCs to participate in productive struggle. Too often, a one size fits all approach is used with staff. So, few teachers and PLCs are receiving just the right amount of support.

"We need to find a balance of having high expectations of our people to get their work done with excellence, while also ensuring that if they need help, they know they can come to you for support. Weakness is not shown when asking for help, but it is often when you don't ask for help when you need it most. Make sure the people you serve know that you are there to help them when they need it most, as their success, is your success." George Couros

Recognize Contributions and Show Appreciation

As tempting as it is to try to influence employee satisfaction with the use of carrots and sticks, it isn't necessary for sustained motivation. Far more powerful is your commitment to recognizing and acknowledging contributions so that employees feel appreciated and valued.

The temptation to "pull the grade card" exists for many teachers. It can be seen as a shortcut to providing the relevance and context to the tasks students are being encouraged to complete. Students start asking way too early, "Does this count?" Once the question is raised, the teacher's motivation task has become more difficult. It's much easier to encourage learners when they are shown how their effort has paid off. They are motivated when they see their contribution to a team's success or how they have positively impacted others. This requires teachers to assist learners in finding relevant tasks.

My granddaughter’s swim team provides a great example of appreciating contributions as she finishes a race having taken 2 seconds off her last best time.

When PLCs focus on goals that have urgency to the teacher members, leaders and team members identify individual and group contributions. These celebrations are motivating.

Check-in to Assess Your Own Motivation

What if you’ve done all of the above but are still struggling to motivate others? You may need to assess your own motivation. Employees are very attuned to whether leaders have a genuine connection to the work.

Great questions as we return to school at the start of a new year!

- How excited am I about the work we are doing?

- Are students convinced that their teacher is looking forward to learning something about them and the topic of the new unit they are starting to unpack?
- Is the school leadership team passionate about closing the gap between where our learners are and where we want them to be?
- As an educator are you looking forward to productive struggle?