Motivation for Continuous Improvement

Module Objectives

In this module we’re going to discuss the important, and often overlooked, role of motivation in helping organizations sustain high performance.

Specifically, by the end of this module, you’ll have a better understanding of what actually motivates people to want to practice kaizen and, perhaps more importantly, what doesn’t.

Now, much of what we discuss in this module has been influenced by the writings of Dr. W. Edwards Deming, the experiences of our customers in motivating people to practice continuous improvement, and one of our favorite books called *Drive, The Surprising Truth About What Motivates People* which was written by Daniel Pink which, along with the book *The Power of Habit*, we highly recommend you read.

Sobering Facts

OK, I’d like to start this module off with a sobering fact... according to the 2013 Gallup poll only 30% of the U.S. workforce is engaged in their work meaning 70% of all U.S. workers are disengaged and not reaching their full potential.

And while we don’t have the exact figures we believe its safe to say other countries share similar challenges. Of course this isn’t a new problem... in fact Dr. Deming did his best to bring this issue to everyone’s attention many years ago when he said, “If management stopped demotivating their employees then they wouldn’t have to worry so much about motivating them.”

Extrinsic Motivation

So, with this said, I have a question for you. How does your organization go about trying to motivate people? Do you receive a bonus if certain objectives are hit? What about your compensation? Is your annual raise dependent on running a
certain number of kaizen events or achieving a certain score on your department’s balanced scorecard?

Well, if you answered yes to either of these, chances are good your company is attempting to motivate you with what psychologists refer to as extrinsic motivators, which include things like monetary rewards.

Another phrase used to explain this sort of behavior is the carrot and stick... where the carrot, or extrinsic reward, is dangled in front of employees much like a carrot is dangled in front of a hungry horse.

In other words, the bonus, or carrot, is waived in front of you in hopes that you’ll work hard enough to reach it. And, if you do, the theory is you’ll be happy since you got the carrot, or monetary reward, and the company will also be happy since you would have helped the company reach their goals.

And, as it turns out, the carrot and stick approach can be a somewhat effective motivational method for certain types of highly repetitive work that doesn’t require much, if any, innovation, or thinking, on the employee’s part.

But, for those of us that don’t perform highly repetitive work, research has found the carrot and stick approach to be highly ineffective and, in some cases, can actually be damaging to the long-term success and happiness of that particular employee.

So, if the carrot and stick approach isn’t effective what’s the leader attempting to foster a Culture of Kaizen to do? Is there a better way? The short answer is yes, there is.

**Intrinsic Motivation**

The key, as it turns out, is to understand what Daniel Pink refers to as Type I behavior where the “I” stands for “intrinsic.” Type I behavior is a counterbalance to the old school “Type X” behavior that focused on extrinsic, or external rewards.

In other words, what behavioral scientists have found, through many different studies, is that people are typically far more motivated to perform at a high level when they sense there are intrinsic rewards within their grasp. And, when there are intrinsic rewards available, work satisfaction increases, which, as we learned earlier, often results in the release of happy brain chemicals, such dopamine, serotonin, and oxytocin.

And, perhaps more significantly, these satisfied and happy workers are far less likely to battle the effects of the anxiety producing chemical, cortisol, since they’re not as stressed about whether they’re going to ever reach that extrinsic reward, or carrot, being dangled in front of them.
So, with this all said, in order for kaizen leaders to transition from the traditional extrinsic reward system to the, more effective, intrinsic reward system three things must exist – **autonomy, mastery, and purpose.**

**Autonomy**

First, **autonomy**, which we learned about when we explored the SCARF model, provides a sense of personal choice that helps people feel good about the work they do. This is why many lean thinking organizations have adopted the autonomous team concept whereby the business is actually managed by the people who do the work enabling the folks that used to manage things – namely front line supervisors and managers – to now act as coaches and mentors to their subordinates.

Additionally, the practice of autonomous maintenance, which we explore in more detail within our Total Productive Maintenance, or TPM course, is another example of how employees can be empowered to manage an extremely important part of the business. Now, the key to making autonomy work comes down to the four T’s – task, time, technique, and team.

First, employees need to have control over what they do which is what we’re talking about with the first T, **task**. In other words, they should never be explicitly told what to do which, being honest, can be very hard for the manager, or leader, who may be used to micro-managing their team members.

Next, these same employees should also have control over when they do things. In other words, the team leader may decide the best **time** for their daily huddle is every day before they break for lunch even though this same meeting has traditionally been done in the morning. Put another way, they should be given the autonomy, or freedom, to make these decisions.

Along these same lines employees, in addition to not being told what to do, granting autonomy also means employees have the freedom to choose how they’ll do their job.

This may be why the best run kaizen events are those where the team comes up with their own countermeasures instead of being told how to solve the problems by their leaders. With this all said, it is important to note that autonomy should be constrained by existing standards, clear customer requirements, and agreed laws and work rules.

To be sure, autonomy doesn’t mean everyone gets to do what they want no matter the consequence. And last, but certainly not least, employees should be able to choose the people they work with on projects.

In other words, instead of telling someone who should be part of that same kaizen event, or project, let the team leader assess the situation and select the people they believe are best suited to help them.
Mastery

The second thing needed to transition from an extrinsic reward system to an intrinsic reward system is mastery. Put simply, mastery is pursued when people are fully engaged and committed to becoming better at something that truly matters to them.

This will obviously be different for each person. Some people are passionate about helping people, which is why they may be drawn to the healthcare profession while others may be drawn to pushing the limits of technology, which is what draws them to work in the tech sector while others, like you and I, are drawn to continuously improving processes and people which is most likely why you're reading this!

No matter the profession, if the employee doesn’t believe the work he or she does is important, and valued, they’ll never be able to approach the state of mastery.

Now, one of the keys to recognizing mastery in action is when employees reach that mysterious mental state known as flow, not to be confused with the smooth, and continuous, flow of materials and information. When we're working in a state of mental flow time seems to disappear and we experience a deep sense of satisfaction since our brains are being flooded with dopamine and the same endorphins athletes experience during strenuous exercise.

With this said, there are three principles that should be in place when attempting to apply mastery to our work.

First, the person must recognize, and truly believe, that his or her work can be improved. If they don’t believe this they’ll simply lose hope and become stressed out.

But, along these same lines, in order for mastery to exist the work must still be challenging and, at times, require the person to go outside of their comfort zone. To be sure, achieving mastery isn’t easy.

And lastly, the third rule of mastery is to recognize that it can never be fully attained which is why it’s such a perfect fit within the context of continuous improvement since, as we know, the kaizen journey is never complete since we’re never done learning and improving.

Purpose

OK, the third, and final element of the three-part motivation equation is purpose.

Earlier in the course we talked about the importance of understanding why things need to be done instead of simply knowing what is to be done and how to go about it. When we understand, and believe in, the “why” of our department and/or the
company our employees are far more likely to fully engage in the process. In fact, this just may be the secret power of kaizen and the idea of respecting humanity.

You see, if we truly buy into the idea that lean is as much about improving people’s lives, as it is processes, we can easily grasp onto the most powerful “why” of all... namely improving the lives of the people we interact with in our workplaces, at our suppliers, and, of course, with our customers.

Additionally, lean thinking tools and concepts such as hoshin kanri, or policy deployment, are excellent at clearly identifying the mission and purpose of the organization. If you’d like to learn more about this please be sure to check out our Hoshin Planning course in the School of Lean.

**Summary**

OK, to summarize this module, the formula kaizen leaders can use to transition from the traditional extrinsic reward system to the, more effective, intrinsic reward system consists of 3 elements: autonomy, which is our desire to be self-directed; mastery, which is our drive to improve what we do; and purpose, which involves our desire to be part of something larger than ourselves.

And, as Dr. Deming taught us all, it’s so important to remember that it’s far easier to positively impact people when we stop demotivating them in the first place. In other words, we all need to remember that people desperately desire things like status, certainty, autonomy, relatedness, and fairness as we learned about when we explored the SCARF model earlier in the course.

**Up Next**

All right, and that wraps up this module on motivation... in our next lesson we’re going to get a little philosophical as we talk about the topics of ethos, pathos, and logos... so, we’ll speak to you soon!