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As an Executive, Do You Use a Carrot, Stick, or Something Else?



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Success is driven by motivation as “The factors giving purpose or direction to human or animal behaviour”¹. When it comes to motivation, the old adage of carrot and stick still seems prevalent in the business world: the unspoken threat of slipping down the greasy career pole versus the tasty treats of extra pay, extra holiday days or conference trips away. Where should the balance lie though? Do you get more from one or the other or could there possibly be a third option when it comes to motivating employees to drive business value?

The zeitgeist of today’s market encourages leaders “To rely on the carrot versus stick approach for motivation”² which means shoeing in greater incentives for meeting those all important KPIs. The argument here is that the carrot has a much more profound, longer lasting effect on an employee’s motivation at only a small cost to the company. Although this idea has sat high atop a pedestal for a few decades now, the pendulum has swung back the other way to more Machiavellian ideals: “So long as he keeps his subjects united and loyal, a prince ought not to mind gaining the reputation for cruelty”³; indeed, the stick may be mightier than the carrot.

Support for the stick approach comes from the notion that productivity on any given day is slowed by neglecting distasteful utilities and that “A little well-directed pain can be a good thing”⁴ in making sure that these less than desirable tasks – admin, anybody? – finally get pushed through. This ideology does not rule out the use of the carrot approach in driving employee output, but where there are these aforementioned gaps in productivity, the stick approach is considered a more favourable option.

There’s a third factor to consider in the bid to get employees to reach their business potential however, and that is self-motivation. Carrot and stick work as great external factors in amplifying worker motivation, but one has to consider where motivation starts. It’s all well and good trying to throw petrol on a fire to create an inferno, but you’re stuck if there’s no fire in the first place. Self-motivation certainly gets the ball rolling, but some would even go as far as to say that prioritising such can eliminate the need for carrot and stick approaches. Lisa Lai, in her Harvard Business Review article ‘Motivating Employees Is Not About Carrots or Sticks’, argues for the idea of creating

“...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.”⁵

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This is a ground breaking idea when it comes to the idea of motivation, but the question remains of how to implement change in order to create this shift of focus towards self-motivating factors? The suggestions on how to achieve these results boil down to the following:

Put work into context

Employees that can understand why their work is valued will contribute to the team more than those that assume their work won't make a difference.

Plan for the future

The future is always full of challenges, but helping an employee understand potential challenges and giving them the tools to chip away at issues will help to keep them energised and on track to perform.

Be appreciative

People slogging away to give their best for you deserve appreciation. It may seem an obvious point, but it's crucial to give credit where credit is due: even a two minute chat to recognise contribution and say thank you can really make somebody's day and keep them motivated for the challenges to come.

Review

Want to know if somebody's motivated? Ask them! Not only can you find out which current obstacles can be eliminated to help an employee through a project, even showing a genuine interest in the welfare of staff can boost their motivation levels, knowing that they are cared for and appreciated.

Motivation is a tricky thing to influence, but it seems that centuries of pondering on the idea are finally starting to pay off. The 21st century still hasn't made its mind up when it comes to the carrot and stick approach, although modern thinkers are starting to return to the merits of the stick. Carrot and stick may soon fade into obscurity though, with the new school thinking that driving self-motivation will lead to success. I would suggest that it comes down to the age old idea of balance. Going too far with the carrot will lead to complacency; going too far with the stick will lead to hatred for work and a reduction in motivation; going (blindly) too far focusing on self-motivation could lead to employee strain, whereby they may prefer external incentives to internal motivators.

I would argue that thinking about motivation relies on thinking about the individual you wish to motivate. Creating bespoke systems of motivation to best suit each individual is surely the way forward. Everyone is unique so maybe it's time to start acknowledging that when it comes to motivating the workforce.

White Paper Sources | Cited Materials

- 1 Anonymous, "Motivation", Oxford England Dictionary, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 2 Lisa Lai, **Motivating Employees Is Not About Carrots or Sticks**, Harvard Business Review, (Watertown: Harvard Business Publishing, 2017).
- 3 Niccolo Machiavelli, **The Prince and Discourses On the First Decade of Titus Livius**, (New York: The Modern Library, 1940).
- 4 Rick Wartzman, **To Be a Better Boss, Use a Stick or a Carrot?**, Forbes, (New York: Forbes Media, 2009).
- 5 Lisa Lai, **Motivating Employees Is Not About Carrots or Sticks**, Harvard Business Review, (Watertown: Harvard Business Publishing, 2017).

About the Author



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Steven Brown is a Director in the Stanton Chase Auckland office. He focuses primarily on the technology sector, but he also has considerable experience in government and infrastructure, as the sectors are irrevocably intertwined in New Zealand.

Prior to developing his career in the search industry in the UK, Steven spent ten years working in the government sector in a variety of operations and management roles. He started his career in executive search in 1993 with a local search company; he quickly excelled in the industry and was asked to become the European Director of another executive search company in London, where he specialized in technology, consultancy/professional services, finance, government organizations and infrastructure companies. He worked on numerous high level search assignments while building up a global network of C-level executives, leading technicians and thought leaders.

Steven moved to New Zealand with his wife and two children in 2012. He has developed a high level of understanding of the Australasian market and build a network of contacts with Senior Executives in the Technology, Government and Infrastructure space.

He continues to work on his work life balance and as an experienced rugby coach he loves nothing better than to working with people and teams who dream to become the very best that they can be. Even though he has worked with international rugby captains he still gets the most pleasure when teaching youngsters the art of rugby.

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